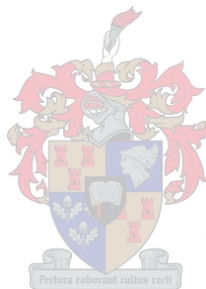


# **Improvisation and Playmaking:**

A look at some improvisation techniques and their applications during the directing process.

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Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Drama at the University of Stellenbosch.



Supervisor: Prof. Temple Hauptfleisch

December 2003.

**Declaration:**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:

Date: 28 November 2003.

Abstract:

In this thesis the author investigates aspects of the use of improvisation and improvisational methods, techniques and exercises by modern practitioners.

The study commences with a look at the beginnings of modern improvisation in the nineteenth century, when improvisation was used only tentatively by performers as a pre-production aid to the exploration of character and personal response. In more recent times the process has become one of collaboration and research; as a means of self-discovery, as a means of text creation and as a vehicle for finding a 'voice' for the silent majority within a particular community or society.

This study also traces the use of improvisation in South Africa where the improvisational process has been incorporated into democratic and collaborative forms like workshop theatre and workers' theatre, and serves as a useful method of political investigation and conscientisation. The study will also briefly touch what on is now termed 'theatre-for-development', since its practitioners make extensive use of improvisational techniques, and its techniques are allied to those of workers' and workshop theatre.

The final chapter provides an application of the theories discussed in the bulk of the study in a brief discussion of the author's own attempts at utilising improvisation as a directing and scriptwriting tool in a student production.

### Opsomming:

In hierdie tesis ondersoek die outeur die gebruik van improvisasie en die verskillende metodes, tegnieke en praktiese toepassings daarvan deur moderne praktisyns.

Die tesis begin deur te kyk na die oorsprong van moderne improvisasie in die 19e eeu toe improvisasie slegs tentatief deur akteurs gebruik is om vóór die produksiefase as 'n hulpmiddel te dien om 'n karakter en persoonlike reaksies te ondersoek. Die proses het onlangs tot een van samewerking en navorsing verander; as 'n metode tot self-ontdekking, 'n hulpmiddel by teks-skepping en as 'n medium om 'n "stem te vind" vir die 'stille meerderheid' binne 'n gegewe gemeenskap of samelewing.

Hierdie studie ondersoek ook die gebruik van improvisasie in Suid Afrika waar die improvisasieproses in demokratiese en spanwerk vorme soos bv. werkswinkelteater en werkersteater geïnkorporeer is, waar hulle as uiters nuttige vorme van politieke ondersoek en –bewusmaking dien. Die studie raak ook vlugtig aan 'teater-vir-ontwikkeling', aangesien die praktisyns daarvan grootliks gebruik maak van improvisasie-tegnieke en die tegnieke wat hulle gebruik redelike ooreenstem met dié van werkswinkelteater en werkersteater.

Die finale hoofstuk verskaf 'n toepassing van die verskeie teorieë wat in die hoofgedeelte van die tesis bespreek word, in 'n kort bespreking van die outeur se eie pogings om improvisasie as 'n regie- en teksskeppingsinstrument in 'n studenteproduksie, te gebruik.



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Many thanks must also go to my supervisor, Prof. Temple Hauptfleisch, for his invaluable advice and encouragement during the course of my studies.

Dedication:

For A and S, always there with faith and prayer...  
and for my Boo, M, for always.

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## **Introduction:**

### **Premise:**

Improvisation, as a spontaneous and often subconscious process, has been used throughout the centuries as a means of accessing the recesses of the creative mind, usually to allow for the free-flow of ideas. These ideas, once tempered by the imagination, become meaningful interactions between individuals. But there are also various socio-political factors that undoubtedly influence these interactions, factors which have in many cases, come to mould the individuals participating in those interactions.

This particular investigation seeks to study some of the concepts and practices used by a selection of the more modern improvisation practitioners, so as to gain a clearer picture of the various methods, exercises and techniques available. The emphasis will be on commonly shared strategies rather than difference, leading on to a final experimental application.

### **Methodology:**

The theoretical section of this study is largely based on the *documented* theories of a few selected practitioners. Theories that have been recorded either by the practitioners themselves, or by those who have witnessed, researched or encountered the various practitioners' concepts and practices. Therefore the bulk of the investigation is in the form of historical research, literature study and an assessment of the shared practical techniques used by the various practitioners. The applied section of this thesis utilises an experimental production by the author herself to test and evaluate a number of the techniques.

## Chapter Outline:

Each chapter has been subdivided so that a number of issues can be dealt with clearly and succinctly.

### *Chapter One:*

The first modern day attempts at defining and contextualising the term “improvisation” were relatively tentative ones. Some of the more referred-to theories on improvisation in the mid twentieth century are the writings of teacher-practitioners such as Viola Spolin, John Hodgson, Ernest Richards and Peter Slade. All of these teachers believed in employing improvisational techniques primarily for the education of individuals about themselves (re-connecting with their imagination and spontaneity) and their environment (social accepted responses and behavioural patterns) and, secondly, for making the participants more socially rounded and less self-conscious human beings.

On the other hand there have been a number of prolific practitioners who have used improvisation for purely theatrical purposes but struggled to come to terms with what seemed a very loosely defined practice. These are many, but given the scope of the study, I have decided to focus on three of the most prominent historical figures. They are Constantin Stanislavski, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook. Upon closer inspection of each artist’s work and writings one comes to realise that each practitioner’s tentativeness in the employment of the term “improvisation” and its techniques, may have been due to the circumstances in which each artist was living and working, and the aim of their work. Stanislavski, for example, was working in what was perhaps (comparatively) a conservative and restrictive time for innovation, and was attempting a groundbreaking innovation, the establishing a new “method” of acting. In all of Stanislavski’s records, therefore, improvisation is used exclusively in connection with character development and investigation relating to the actor and director. In the case of Grotowski and Brook, however, much of their writing was published in a less restrictive period, which had come to demand a more socially conscious role for theatre, one in which improvisation could



find wider application (see Chapter Two). Grotowski and Brook's theatre practices at the time thus saw the use of improvisation as a means of facilitating the investigation of two kinds of universality or commonality of human experience. For Brook commonality could be found in the form of a *universal language* and for Grotowski this universal connection took on the form of a non-verbal *physical* communication.

Chapter one is therefore a comparative look at certain focal points in the work of all of the above-mentioned practitioners.

### *Chapter Two:*

Parallel to the foregoing improvisation became an important tool for the breakaway or alternative generation of practitioners in Europe and America from the 1920s onwards. These practitioners helped in dissolving some of the stigma attached to the, as yet, unclear concepts of improvisation through further development of a community-oriented, sometimes Marxist, approach to theatre and performance. The investigation of each practitioner has been presented in, as close to, chronological order as possible because of the influences each practitioner has had on their successors and even contemporaries (as is the nature of theatre practice). Practitioners like Vsevolod Meyerhold, Jacques Copeau, Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator, as well as members of the Grand Magic Circus and Joseph Chaikin, all sought to embrace the experimental, and often socio-political, nature of improvisation in an attempt to discover more liberal theatre practice. They ultimately provided a sound basis from which individuals, the world over, could proceed to utilise the theatrical *weapon* which improvisational theatre had become.

### *Chapter Three:*

The foregoing techniques undoubtedly had a specific and profound influence on the alternative theatre movement in South Africa, where improvisation was used, most effectively, for text creation by South African practitioners like Barney Simon and Athol Fugard. These two practitioners are among the most notable figures to adopt the notion

and create the embracing genre generally referred to as “workshopped theatre”. Workshopped theatre became a medium for *connecting* actors to their political circumstances and their past and present situations. It also functioned as a medium for connecting actor to audience, in order to overcome the disadvantaged and repressive circumstances of the oppressed, by portraying the lives of the people and providing them with tangible evidence of the steps they could take towards their own liberation. The forward-thinking hybrid nature and collaborative structure of plays of the workshop genre seemed to set a precedent for the liberation of improvisational theatre, as it became a means to an end: the betterment of circumstance.

#### *Chapter Four:*

This chapter is an account of how, in the first year of my Masters degree, I used my knowledge of the general structure of the South African workshop theatre process from school, in conjunction with the information gleaned during my undergraduate studies and other independent research, to structure my own process for a workshop theatre production. The process ran from research and data collection, through improvisation of scenarios and possible dialogue and culminated in the creation of a text. This final chapter is a frank assessment of that process and some of the conclusions that I was able to draw regarding improvisation techniques and elements of the workshop process. It also includes feedback on feelings the cast members had about the entire process: its effectiveness, its applicability to their own situation and to the greater theatrical situation in South Africa at the moment.

#### Limits of the field of study:

This study is one of a number of coursework projects undertaken as part of the M.Dram programme and as such is intended to an exploratory overview of some of the possible applications of the improvisation and improvisational techniques in the realm of theatre, using some of the more prominent originators and practitioners as examples. However, this is in no sense intended to a complete analysis of improvisation as a form and process.



While realising that this is an exceptionally wide field of expertise in which there are (and have been) many practitioners and theorists who have made notable contributions to the development of improvisation and improvisation<sup>1</sup>, the author has inevitably had to be selective and has thus knowingly and deliberately focussed on the forerunners and *primary* sources of information regarding earlier theories and practise in improvisation, rather than the contemporary *interpretations* thereof.

Concerning the language, please note that, while I am aware of the gender-issues to be debated on the point, I have used male nouns and pronouns in non-specific cases throughout this thesis for the sake of brevity and uniformity. This choice should not be construed as anything more than a pragmatic decision.

#### Terminology:

For the sake of further clarity it may be prudent to mention what the author's understanding of some of the frequently used terms in this thesis are. The term *facilitator* is intended to be a generic term for the person who takes on the gentle guidance of a group of participants. It is used in most non-specific cases to refer to the individual who assumes the role of guide, sometimes teacher and at other times director of proceedings during an improvisation. The term *modern* has been used in this thesis as a reference to those theories and practices that have evolved since the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is not used as an equivalent of the term *contemporary*, which alludes to those practices that have been developed in the late twentieth century. General terms like *universal* and *liberal* are used as opposites for restrictive concepts like parochial and conventional, rather than as references to more complex philosophical or political concepts. The term *community* has been used in most cases to refer to the immediate environment within which the practitioner is working, sometimes it is as local as a village but in most cases it refers to the geographical space that is dominated by one social circumstance. And finally the social references of the terms *Marxism* and *hegemony* are

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<sup>1</sup> And even omitted in some cases, the reader may want to refer to works like Alison Oddey's *Devising Theatre* (1994) and Shomit Mitter's *System's of Rehearsal* (1992), among others, especially when cross referencing the first chapter.



used to highlight the author's perception of the political intent of the practitioners in most cases, and should not be over-interpreted to be the practitioners' intentions in all cases.

## **Chapter One:**

### **Forerunners in the Development of Improvisation Practices**

As a starting point for this investigation into the theoretical and practical applications of improvisation today, it is useful to summarise the concepts of some of the prominent forerunners in this particular field. The practitioners to be discussed have been placed in two very loose and arbitrary categories for the purposes of comparison, they are: *teacher-practitioners* and *theatre practitioners*. The four teacher-practitioners have been grouped as such because much of their writing and practical discoveries were based on their work with student-performers. The primary sources for this part of the study are: Viola Spolin's comprehensive introduction to her own experience: *Improvisation for the Theatre* (1963), John Hodgson and Ernest Richards, work: *Improvisation: Discovery and Creativity in Drama* (1966), and Peter Slade's *Experience of Spontaneity* (1968). These works cover aspects such as: the skills required for improvisation, the selection of an environment conducive to truthful creation and the role played by the teacher-director in the improvisation process.

These three sources will be compared with the records of work done by three more theatrically involved practitioners: Constantin Stanislavski, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook. What is interesting about these three leading theatrical practitioners is that, although each investigation begins with a search for the spontaneous and intuitive, there is acknowledgment of the need for a system or structure to the investigation, in order to achieve improvisation's aims. They believe that improvisation techniques are worthy of inclusion in their work but, unlike the teacher-practitioners, the actors/students are not the main focus of their practical discovery, rather their focus lies with the formulation of their individual vision for theatre.

The teacher-practitioners also address the element of *control* or *guiding* of the improvisational art form and they all make suggestions that could, arguably, have given improvisation the kind of regularity that Stanislavski, Grotowski and Brook felt it lacked.



Because the theories on improvisation and its practices were relatively untested at the time when the three theatre-based practitioners were beginning to formulate novel and personal theories on theatre and the rehearsal process, one can understand that they only tentatively used the term. It is most useful, therefore, to consider the opinions of the three theatre-orientated individuals and their understandings (or misunderstandings) regarding the usefulness and applications of improvisation, in conjunction with our study of the practical attempts, and apparent successes, of the other four practitioners.

Although the author is aware of the arbitrariness of the grouping and acknowledges that there may be many areas where the grouped practitioners could disagree with one another (creating areas of ambiguity), the aim here is to highlight a few areas of similarity, so that the two more general schools of thought can be held up for comparison. The author is also fully aware that the practitioners were working in different times and using different approaches, and that, although the practitioners up for discussion use improvisation for the purposes of education and direction of the text, there are also a number of other viable uses for improvisation techniques. However, they fall outside of this field of study and will not be discussed.

#### Universality or commonality of human experience:

As a very important starting point, all four teacher-practitioners: Spolin, Hodgson and Richards and Slade, believe that improvisation is a generally achievable undertaking. The only essential quality required is a “basic humanness” (Spolin, 1963: 20) that will allow participants to connect equitably and through an intuitive and “organic process” (Spolin, 1963: 19). All of these practitioners see improvisation as a great leveller; “talent” or “lack of talent” is inconsequential (Spolin, 1963: 3). The only prerequisites they do agree upon, is that participants have to be “open and receptive” (Hodgson and Richards, 1966: 1). There is a *rawness* that Slade describes as becoming “young in heart again” (1968: 5), making the art of improvisation a “...mixture of childlike creation and the adult art of theatre...” (Slade, 1968: 59), where the improvisation can include spontaneous expressions like “...words, dance music, affection or in everyday action,



kind or unkind, generous or vindictive, in loyalty to a cause or in sudden burst of reaction such as treachery”, extremes of emotion most naturally seen in a child (Slade, 1968: 1).

One can also understand why the practitioners would advocate this *childlike* state, because improvisation demands an open and amenable frame of mind, allowing the participant to be at his most receptive for input and interaction. It is almost as though the participant is required to immobilise his intellect for the duration of the improvisation, enabling him to truly assimilate the experience.

Like the teacher-practitioners, Stanislavski, Grotowski and Brook agree that the point of departure for improvisation is a commonality of human experience. Their investigation seeks to return to the past and a type of *memory* that is intrinsic and merely needs to be accessed and enhanced<sup>2</sup>. Each of the three theatrical-practitioners, however, has very different ideas of what the essential human experience is and what process the participant has to undergo in order to coax out that which is common to all.

For Stanislavski, the “fundamental aim of [his] art is the creation of the inner life of a human spirit, and its expression in an artistic form” (Stanislavski, 1980: 14), but his process begins with a *known* quantity, something outside of the personal experience of the participant: a character created in an author’s “intuition” (Stanislavski, 1988: 28). Although Slade, like Stanislavski, believes in utilising improvisation in connection with a script he does not believe the text to be the exclusive point of departure; “spontaneous work can precede, go parallel with, or be associated with early script trials to improve the acting and vitalise the scene in the theatre work...” (Slade, 1968: 9)<sup>3</sup>. Stanislavski’s process of introspection, which began *outside* of the participant with the text, advances to become an inward investigation: one which moves from the “periphery” to the innermost spiritual essence (Stanislavski, 1988: 8). The participant is required to penetrate the

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<sup>2</sup> Stanislavski calls it “emotion memory” (1988: 26) Grotowski calls it “scenic facts”, a kind of physical memory (In Fumaroli, 1969: 108) and Brook places emphasis on an “objective tonal consciousness” and intrinsic or “instinctive language” that needs to be remembered and accessed (1975, *The Empty Space*).

<sup>3</sup> This is a view shared by Grotowski and Brook.

realm of the subconscious so that he can infuse the part with *life* transforming something that is theatrical fact into something that is *human*.

Grotowski sought 'humanness' too; a quality he feels can be found through the "via negativa": a deductive process that works towards the eradication of "blocks" in the subconscious and physicality rather than the collection of skills (Grotowski, 1965: 17). His process allows for the stripping away all "extraneous elements" so as to "...focus on the actor's ability to create transformation by means of her/his art alone" (Wolford, 1997: 1). Grotowski had chosen a process of "physical relapse", one where the participants are required to return to a state where they have access to a universal system of signs. Grotowski believes that he is working in a "post theatrical epoch" (Schechner, 1997: 207) where his process becomes necessarily a "journey away from the theatre to the roots of culture, to the essential communication and perception" (Grotowski in Schechner, 1997: 208).

Brook's search also takes him in the direction of archetypal and essential communications, behaviours and perceptions in attempts to reduce all areas of performance to their absolute minimum. Brook's process, like Grotowski's, seems to be one of "chiselling" (Brook, 1968: 57) and "whittl[ing] away" (Brook, 1968:67) whereby the participant can discover the very least one needs before understanding, on the part of the spectator, can be reached: was [that which was required] a sound, a movement, a rhythm? (Brook, 1968: 55).

#### Instinctual behaviour:

For Spolin and Slade the only necessary ability required for improvisation is the capacity to tap into one's intuitive, "instinct[ual]" (Slade, 1968: 1) or "organic" (Spolin, 1963: 19) responses to any given situation. This is an intuitive area of experience, defined by Spolin as: "...that area of knowledge which is beyond the restrictions of culture, race, education, psychology, and age; deeper than the 'survival dress' of mannerisms,



prejudices, intellectualisms, and borrowings most of us wear in our daily lives” (Spolin, 1963: 19).

As a logical starting point, the teacher-practitioners advocate the removal of the largest creative block of all: socialised behaviour patterns. Social indoctrination and the “old frames of reference” are the cause of stagnation during the improvisation process, because it is part of the human condition to doubt oneself as a unique individual (Spolin, 1963: 20). This assumption is based on the fact that “...society is nearly always unwilling to recognise anything or anyone that seems different...making individuals afraid of being different” (Hodgson and Richards, 1966: 19). This fear of being different is coupled with the individual’s tentativeness because the “...simplest move out into the environment [in which the improvisation is taking place] is interrupted by our need for favourable comment or interpretation by established authority” and as a result tentativeness overrides spontaneity (Spolin, 1963: 7). Individuals start to fall back on banalities and clichés, drawing their responses from their ideas of “socially acceptable...[or] standardised and stereotyped” behaviour (Hodgson and Richards, 1966: 3). This behavioural pattern is symptomatic of how individuals have come to place themselves in society; most people continually seek approval or disapproval as a regulator of effort or marker of their position in society, it is a mythical yardstick for one’s eligibility in taking the next step in some kind of societal ‘rite of passage’.

When participants begin to base their responses on an impression of what is socially acceptable they are no longer making sincere responses in an improvisation. The clichéd banality of some of the resultant improvisation responses Stanislavski and Grotowski encountered, was the trigger for the aversion they apparently had to the term improvisation. Both practitioners have a documented distaste for the ‘improvised savage’<sup>4</sup>, because they were of the opinion that this was a particularly non-productive behaviour where participants had been seen to:

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<sup>4</sup> A concept discussed by both Stanislavski (1980: 26) and Grotowski (1989: 296).

...imitate trances, to overuse the arms and hands, to form processions, to carry someone in a procession, to play a scapegoat, and his persecutors, to console a victim, to perform simplicity confused with irresponsible behaviour, to present one's own clichés of behaviour, social daily-life behaviour, as if they were naturalness...

- Grotowski, 1989: 296

This behaviour was not the return-to-our-roots that it claimed to be but rather a pretentious "occidental" attempt at "natural" or "base" human interactions (Grotowski, 1989: 296).

The participants' impressions of socially acceptable behaviour and the way it influences their attitudes, needs to be discouraged, if the participants were to integrate themselves to their full potential in the improvisation and be "organically involved...[and not merely] function with only part of their total selves" (Spolin, 1963: 7). Involvement in improvisation therefore, requires participants to "...draw on their own resources [in order] to think out basic principles" (Hodgson and Richards, 1966: 3) because "when response to experience takes place at this intuitive level, when a person functions beyond a constricted intellectual plane, he is truly open for learning" (Spolin, 1963: 4).

Spolin, therefore came up with a process that would help in breaking the chains of social indoctrination, and be a tool whereby the participants could be spontaneously "reformed into [them]selves" (Spolin, 1963: 4). Spolin equates improvisation with a *game* or *problem solving* process; it is an alternative means of expression, which does not stifle self-discovery, -assessment, -expression and -identity but that allows for the pursuit of the crucial and universal "ingenuity and inventiveness" (1963: 5). Spontaneity is the ultimate catalyst in the process and is "...the moment of personal freedom when [the participant is] faced with a reality and can see it, explore it, and act accordingly" (Spolin, 1963: 4). It is a time of "discovery, of experience [and] of creative expression" (Spolin, 1963: 4).



### Experiencing and involvement:

For the participant or ‘improviser’ to gain and learn the most that he possibly can from the exercise, he is required to “experience” (Spolin, 1963: 3) and “...integrate... and find...himself within the whole activity” (Spolin, 1963: 10). Experiencing entails “...penetration into the environment...[or] total organic involvement with it”; and experiencing (and the individual’s capacity to do so) is the only true indicator of the participant’s *talent* (Spolin, 1963: 3). The success of experiencing comes down to the individual’s ability to immerse himself in the improvisational problem/game, and it requires them to engage all elements or levels of their being: the (already-mentioned) intuitive, the (largely-untapped) physical and the intellectual (but only that which was appropriate). The proper utilisation of these human qualities allows the participant to meet the “crises” of the problem and ultimately achieve the aims of the game (Spolin, 1963: 23).

Because the process of improvisation was still in its formative stages, when individuals like Stanislavski and his contemporaries first began to engage its techniques, one understands why these theatre practitioners only tentatively used improvisation and it’s many spontaneous, ‘untested’ and even uncontrollable practices. Improvisation requires the actors to *let go* to a certain extent, because the participant needs to surrender to the flow of the game, in order for spontaneity to be provoked and in order for spontaneous growth to take place. In ‘surrendering’ to the process of improvisation the total person of the actor is invoked and by engaging the intuition, the physical and the intellectual facets of the participant’s ‘total person’, he is able to achieve a greater sensitivity and respond to the “multiple stimuli” of an improvisation (Spolin, 1963: 5). The growth of the individual is then determined by the amount of direct contact made with the provocative stimuli in the environment and the efforts employed in the response to those stimuli. Under the right circumstances the contact between the participant and stimuli will cause enough ‘excitation’ for the student to transcend himself – “he is freed to go out into the environment, to explore, adventure, and face all dangers unafraid” (Spolin, 1963: 6).



The issue of transcendence of *self* is another rather controversial area for the theatre practitioners because although they all agree that one needs to find a changed state of mind (so that individuals are freed from social trappings and convention) there is contention regarding the element of self-investigation. Grotowski believed it necessary for his actors to undergo a strenuous period of self-examination with a view to understanding their own personal limitations and individual shortcomings in the realms of: “mentality, emotionality and physicality” (Grotowski, 1968: 186). Brook’s efforts at self-examination attempt to help the actor in creating a better link between “what they are in life, at home and what they bring to their work on stage” so that they can truthfully examine their personal limitations and shortcomings (Brook in Brown, 2000). These limitations, once identified, can be transcended; when the actors achieve a greater understanding of themselves and the reasons for their respective idiosyncrasies they can tackle the problem areas and ultimately surmount them. One wonders, however, if this kind of egocentricity or focus on self would *aid* in setting up an artificial barrier between *techniques* and *direct experiencing* rather than breaking open the door to the subconscious.

#### The point of concentration:

The *point of concentration* was Spolin’s alternative solution for preventing the unstructured disorder, which could ensue in a problem-solving process like improvisation. She advocates the unconscious resolution of weaknesses as part of the process, rather than the transcendence of problem areas by microscopic investigation of self. The point of concentration works within the improvised or problem-solving situation, to subconsciously release group power and individual genius, while allowing people from all walks of life and socio-political backgrounds access to the complicated art form; theatre. During improvisations of this kind Hodgson and Richard state that participants are placed in circumstances where they “are not able to fall back on other people telling us, or...find instructions precise enough to cover this particular set of circumstances”, but rather are expected to react spontaneously when provided with only sparse information (1966: 3). The teacher-director presents the problem quickly and



simply, giving only a succinct description of the problem. This is done, so as to cover the necessary material and possibly give a short demonstration, as well as clarifying the point of concentration where necessary<sup>5</sup>. It should be clear to the students from the beginning that "...how a problem is solved must grow out of the stage relationships" because pre-planning an improvisation works to the detriment of spontaneity and prevents new and untried experiences from being discovered in many cases (Spolin, 1963: 35).

The point of concentration, therefore, works in four ways. Firstly, it works to "...isolate segments of complex and overlapping theatre techniques so as to thoroughly explore them" (Spolin, 1963: 22). Once the techniques have been subdivided into more manageable pieces, the actor is able to focus his full attention and energies on the problem at hand. There is no longer a need for a fallible and often inattentive human to attempt self-discipline because the focus is narrowed sufficiently that the participant can capably limit his energy expenditure to solving only the problem at hand.

Secondly, the point of concentration "...gives the control, the artistic discipline in improvisation, where otherwise un-channelled creativity might become a destructive rather than a stabilising force" (Spolin, 1963: 22). The problem is almost self-limiting; in that like a game, there are rules or boundaries contained within the problem itself and these boundaries, while maintaining the focus of the exercise, motivate the participants to find fresh ways of addressing possible limitations.

As a continuation of the game metaphor, Spolin goes on to add how the point of concentration "...provides the student with a focus on a changing, moving single point within the acting problem [it is the ball in the game], and this develops his capacity for involvement with the problem and relationship with his fellow players in solving it" (Spolin, 1963: 22). This is a positive corollary of the game or problem solving view of improvisation: its effect on group dynamics. The individual's social skills are unconsciously developed, and his capabilities to function as part of a unit are tested, as improvisation "...requires very close group relationships because it is from group

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<sup>5</sup> While being careful not to "show" the participants what to do, as "showing" prevents self discovery.



agreement and group playing that material evolves for scenes and plays” (Spolin, 1963: 9-10).

The material and substance of scene improvisation are not the work of any one person or any one writer but come out of the cohesion of player acting upon player. The quality, range, vitality, and life of this material is in direct ratio to the process the individual student is going through and what he is actually experiencing in spontaneity, organic growth and intuitive response.

-Spolin, 1963: 19

Finally, once united in focussing on a moving point, the participants can use the point of concentration in solving the problem, as it “...frees the student[s] [up] for spontaneous action and provides the vehicle for an organic rather than cerebral experience” (Spolin, 1963: 22). The group is absorbed in the activity rather than being concerned with themselves undertaking the activity. One of Spolin’s most important stipulations, though, is that all ‘problems’ (or improvisations) must be solvable<sup>6</sup>. When the problems are solvable there is no longer the need for insecurities regarding success or failure and as a result the focus of the exercise lies outside of the student; removing the, often intimidating, impression that the participant is the object of assessment. So within the group structure there is new-found social freedom, from the point of view that there is no wrong answer and stereotypes are discouraged, ensuring that there is no “...induce[d] conformity but, as in a game, [there is]...a spur to action” (Spolin, 1963: 10).

#### Spontaneous learning and the facilitator<sup>7</sup>:

What becomes evident, as a further advantage of the game or problem solving structure is that invention, innovation and even just ‘being different’ are applauded by other player-participants; the player is “free to reach the game’s objectives in any style he chooses” (Spolin, 1963: 5). It is for this reason that the problem-solving situation is so conducive to creativity and, therefore, natural and spontaneous learning through experience. If the

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<sup>6</sup> Bearing in mind that the solution of a problem does not necessarily mean that there is a single resolution, the final ‘solution’ for a particular exercise may be that there is more than one resolution or none at all.

<sup>7</sup> See the Introduction for an explanation of the choice of this particular term.

group works within the immediacy of the process then all the techniques of “...teaching, direction, acting, developing material for scene improvisation, or [understanding how]...to handle a formal play will come from our very core and appear as if by accident”; ultimately, “what we seek will evolve as a result of what we do to find it” (Spolin, 1963: 19).

The problem-solving model also provides a “mutual objective focus” for the teacher and student (Spolin, 1963: 20). The facilitator/teacher no longer needs to analyse, dissect and intellectualise individuals on a personal basis. This is because the problem-solving model, in giving both facilitator and participant direct contact with the material, allows for the cultivation of relationships rather than dependencies between the two parties. The facilitator, therefore, must be prepared to monitor his *language* at all times, and he must be prepared to “analyse [him]self fearlessly” because if the facilitator allows subjectivity to infiltrate his dealings with the participants, personality difficulties and differences may appear, which can result in oblique, impersonal and ineffective experience-learning (Slade, 1968: 5). The relationship is therefore one of mutual involvement, free from the “air of personalities”; a trusting relationship conducive to artistic detachment (Spolin, 1963: 21).

The point of concentration becomes a vital tool for the facilitator, who is now the *coach-player* in the game. It is imperative that the facilitator is able to *guide* the problem-solving game, because “...[he] knows the theatre technically and artistically, and his experiences are needed in leading the group” (Spolin, 1963: 9). While emphasising the guide capacity in which the facilitator is to function, Spolin also emphasises that it is imperative that authoritarian language be eradicated from the student-teacher relationship. Spolin advocates, as a starting point, the removal of labels from the facilitator’s vocabulary because improvisation is concerned with *relationships* and not *information*. Removing technical terms from the facilitator’s vocabulary will not eliminate analytical thought but rather free it, because the player is now allowed to share in his own unique way; “for imposing a label before its organic meaning is fully understood prevents direct experiencing” (Spolin, 1963: 34).



In following this “plan of procedure”, including the point of concentration, “we can gather enough data and experience to emerge with a new understanding of our medium” (Spolin, 1963: 18). Unlike Grotowski, Spolin believes that learning through improvisation is a *cumulative*, rather than deductive, procedure; each person learns theatre techniques at their own speed and without the need for jargon, because improvisation is a process oriented towards each individual’s idiosyncratically paced discovery of theatre practice.

But one wonders whether the point of concentration is not in some ways counter-productive with regard to the creative aims of improvisation, because it seems that it borders on engaging the intellect. Hodgson and Richards agree that the improvisation process helps in reinstating the imagination and training people to think. Improvisation is aimed at the “inculcation of clear mental habits and the training of the expression of the these thoughts in a concise and orderly way...it calls for fairly quick thinking and at times for different levels of thought at one and the same time” (1966: 22-23). Hodgson and Richards do emphasise, however, that the kind of thinking required is different from intellectualising because it is “divorced from the human situation”, with its socio-political allusions, and is rather based in the more archetypal thought patterns of the human condition (1966: 23).

Once one has established the applicability of the problem-solving or game-like structure of improvisation, it also necessary to consider some of the important discrepancies in the game-improvisation comparison. Whereas games are concerned with specific skills and abilities, playing upon the weaknesses of others and sifting out weakness in one’s own team, improvisation revolves instead around developing the weak abilities along with the strong abilities. This development is cultivated in a “living situation” where it is possible to help each other through weaknesses and build confidence (Hodgson and Richards, 1966: 25). Improvisation also thrives in a non-competitive environment where there is no limit to the levels of co-operation, and unlike a game, that draws attention away from the

human aspect (placing emphasis on display instead), development in improvisation revolves around group sharing and not singular effort.

As alternatives to the point of concentration, Stanislavski, Grotowski and Brook tried to find their own methods to control or monitor the spontaneous processes of improvisation, that were not necessarily concurrent with the problem-solving or games model mentioned above. In identifying factors such as what state of mind the participant needs to be in to truly experience, and what faculties the individual must necessarily employ in order to properly immerse themselves in the situation, we can attempt to assess each practitioner's respective process, and their processes effectiveness in relation to the game/problem model.

Stanislavski's method of penetration involves, what one might term, a *theoretical improvisation* – an improvisation he terms finding the “I am” (Stanislavski, 1988: 26). Stanislavski creates an entire mentally constructed environment or circumstances by *active imagining* within which to place an already-constructed character. Stanislavski's participants need to draw on and select experiences from actual emotive past events, so that they can make a composite emotional landscape and can get a real sense of being in a certain situation. Stanislavski's “magic If” is the suggested “lever” to open up this “realm of imagination” so that the participant can move from the *external* which is his intellectual understanding of the character onto the plane of *I am* (Stanislavski, 1980: 42-44).

In order to reach this plane of artistic imagination the participant needs to transcend the plane of reason. This step is one which takes the participant from the role of “observer” (Stanislavski, 1988: 26), through Stanislavski's equivalent of the point of concentration – the “objectives” (Stanislavski, 1988: 51), to the role of “active participant” (Stanislavski, 1988: 26). The *observer* becomes the *active participant* when he engages his *whole being* by calling on the “creative triumvirate”: the feelings, the will and the mind (Stanislavski; 1988: 260). Stanislavski is ultimately trying to provide the participant with a more logical means of accessing his “emotion memory”, with a view to substantiating



the *subtext* of a character; a dimension he considers paramount in the creation of a three dimensional character (Stanislavski, 1988: 271).

But his assertions seem to contradict themselves when Stanislavski comes to speak of the actual performance of a piece. On stage Stanislavski's subtext becomes more of a remembered series of emotional pictures carried by the momentum of the action, rather than an original creation-of-action each performance. Stanislavski's "momentum", makes it possible for the performance to continue "regardless of [the actor's] own will, he lives the part, not noticing how he feels, not thinking about what he does and it moves of its own accord, subconsciously..." (Stanislavski; 1980: 13). The actor seems less like an active participant, engaging mind and will, and more like someone entranced – driven by his unconscious, rather than his subconscious.

One would tend, to a greater degree, to concur with Grotowski's description of what improvisational performance and experiencing should be. To be truly spontaneous, in Grotowski's opinion, is:

...to allow free rein to the profound flux that rises from [the] whole experience, even physical, but related to my consciousness for how could [one] cut [one]self off from [one's] consciousness even in order to rediscover my spontaneity?

- Grotowski in Fumaroli, 1969: 109

Grotowski's process is one that seeks to minimise the time lapse between stimulus and "inner impulse and reaction"; this is achieved by the utilisation of "associations" (Grotowski, 1965: 16). The *association* was Grotowski's *modus operandi* and he emphasised that an association was not to be confused with calculated thought, because an association merely substituted an act with a particular memory, making it a *concrete act* rather than engaging the conscious to make an act more *real*.

But it is possibly with Peter Brook, in his attempts to refine the collective experience, that we find the closest approximation of what all four of the teacher-practitioners are trying to advocate. Brook's *immediate theatre* seeks an "objective tonal consciousness" an

“instinctive language” that can speak “deeply to people” (Brook, 1975). Brook’s initial aim was semi-archetypal enactments, where improvisation is used in the pre-production period, in connection with a text, to investigate the mythical side of the human situation through practical discovery and use of the rules of theatre. In this case, therefore, we realise that improvisation provides a structural basis for creation that makes Brook’s participants aware of the techniques and their relevant labels naturally so that the experience gleaned could *inform* an already scripted character.

Later, however, Brook turned to a more community-oriented working style. Brook was now using improvisation with a view to text creation as he sought to create a better link between the actors’ personal lives, and their lives on the stage; a process which began with the actor’s self-examinations and culminated in the discovery of a composite self to which the audience could associate (Brook in Brown, 2000). The everyday isolation and solitude that Brook required his actors to enter into during text creation, does however raise some questions. When one spends that amount of time in the company of the same group of individuals, is a complacent state of comfort the inevitable result? And is it not possible for a group of participants to become so familiar with one another that they fall into the pattern of the incestuous and pseudo-uninhibited ‘savage’ improvisations to which both Stanislavski and Grotowski had such an aversion.

#### Environment conducive to improvisation:

An area where Stanislavski, Grotowski and Brook do seem to concur, however, is their similar opinions regarding the conditions or environment required for improvisation. In fact, there is general consensus on the part of all three practitioners, along with the problem-solving model contingency, that an atmosphere of pleasure and relaxation is imperative for the actors to be able to overcome their inhibitions. But Stanislavski and Grotowski, although in agreement with the recommendation of relaxation are, at the same time, tentative about the *level* of relaxation. This was because both practitioners sought to eradicate the pretentious ‘improvisation’ that served as a *substitute* for work; where the



actors primary concern was comfort, rather than the “free development of nature” (Fumaroli, 1969: 108).

The socio-political conditions in the 1960s and ‘70s may have been responsible for the nonchalant ethos and work ethic for which Grotowski, in particular, developed a certain amount of contempt. Grotowski resented the inertia that could result from the comfortable “working atmosphere [that didn’t] really get...[participants] to work” (Fumaroli, 1969: 108). In Grotowski’s view the group becomes so comfortable around each other that it is like working with a family, within which no one is stretched and all are “delivered of all responsibility” (Fumaroli, 1969: 108). Grotowski was acknowledging the atrophy in creative advancement that can occur when individuals find absolution from responsibility within the group structure. His dread of creative stagnancy causes one to wonder if the problem with improvisations during the 1960s and 70s may not have rested more with the actor’s attitudes, than with the contemporary or existing concepts regarding improvisation and its execution<sup>8</sup>.

Spolin, among others, viewed the natural processes of group involvement and personal freedom that the participant needed to undergo in order to experience and achieve spontaneity, positively. The element of group participation and agreement worked, in her opinion, to “remove all the imposed tensions and exhaustions of...competitiveness and open the way for harmony” (Spolin, 1963: 10). Personal freedom came when one allowed oneself to play and experience. But in order to be able to take the leap-of-faith required to move into the environment and experience during improvisation, their needed to be stimulation of the participants *desire* to be spontaneous.

#### The role of the facilitator:

It is the vocation of the facilitator to stimulate a desire to be spontaneous, a job that comes under much scrutiny, because the facilitator-participant relationship will affect the entire improvisation process. For this reason objectivity is paramount because judgement,

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<sup>8</sup> Or perhaps the complacency is a result of both factors.

on the part of the facilitator, confines his own experience and that of the students to the *known*, limiting the facilitator to "...rote-teaching of formulas or other standard concepts which prescribe student behaviour" (Spolin, 1963: 8). The facilitator is required to walk a fine line between being involved in the exercise and still trying to remain objective and guide it.

For this the facilitator must keep a "dual point of view" regarding himself and the student: "observation of the handling of the material presented in its obvious or outward use of training for the stage" and "constant and close scrutiny of whether or not the material is penetrating and reaching a deeper level of response – the intuitive" (Spolin, 1963: 19). This places the facilitator in dual role too: as facilitator-director, seeing the overall presentation, and as teacher, seeing the individual and his needs within the group. As teacher, the facilitator must diagnose where each student is lacking and what problem to assign the participant in order to resolve the respective insufficiency. The facilitator is to "activise" each student with respect to each one's immediate capacity for participation, he must be ready and willing to "seize upon an idea" and help the participant to make it his own, recognising each individual's potential and whether they are giving of their best, in relation to their capacity for contribution (Spolin, 1963: 10 and Slade, 1968: 4).

Slade warns the facilitator not to "talk too much" (Slade, 1968:4), he must be able to "sit out the discoveries of the student without interpreting or forcing conclusions on him" while not appearing to be, what Spolin terms, the detached "alien in the room" (1963: 9). When the facilitator does speak, he needs to bear in mind that dogmatism and authoritarian language are to be avoided, because the improvisation-learning is not a verbose process, from the point of view that the participant gleans their own data-cum-information from first-hand experience of the problem, and lecturing won't help – but rather hinder the process. But authoritarian language can be difficult to recognise if the student asks for approval as an indicator of their progress. What the facilitator needs to keep in mind, is that giving subjective feedback of that kind is not an indication of advancement, but only serves to define progress in the facilitator's terms, not the participant's (Spolin, 1963: 9).



Part of authoritarian language is what is termed “verbal predeterminations”; these can arise if the facilitator explains *why* they are doing a particular problem (Spolin, 1963: 31). What the facilitator thinks is helpful explanation puts the participant in a defensive position, as he may come under the impression that there is judgement being allocated. If the impression of the participants is one of predeterminations then they can become “anxious and driven” (Spolin, 1963:10). As a result, the balance of the problem solving duties within the group is upset because those who are driven begin to dominate the exercise and those who do not like dealing with tension or competition, slip into apathetic boredom.

So the language employed by the facilitator must necessarily be directed at clarifying the structure of the problem alone, so that participants do not end up focussing on what’s expected of them and losing sight of the point of concentration. The facilitator or teacher-director also has a role to play in maintaining the point of concentration; it is his place to be aware of the point of concentration and where the group is in relation to it.

#### *Side Coaching:*

The foregoing is achieved through what is called *side coaching*. Side coaching involves a continuous flow of objective verbal input from teacher to pupil-participant, which functions as an ongoing guide used to subconsciously convey various kinds of information to the participants. Side coaching is, therefore, used *while* the participants are involved in the improvisation and helps the student-actor or participant to hold to the point of concentration, by giving each individual self-identity within the activity. Side coaching acts as a guide for the participants while they are working on a problem, by keeping each participant “functioning at a fresh moment of experience” (Spolin, 1963: 28).



Side coaching helps the participants with their blocking and with giving reality to stage objects, while preventing their minds from wandering off into subjectivity<sup>9</sup>. The participants are kept aware of: the present, the group and themselves within the group by the coaching, which delivers objective information without taking on the form of a command. Although one may consider this kind of technique to be distracting, it may just be the case that the participants merely need to come to terms with this level of interaction. The participant learns to listen to the facilitator's voice but not to pay attention to it, so that the guidance does not break the participant's concentration and/or stop him from staying with the problem but infiltrates and influences the participant's actions on a more subconscious level.

Side coaching also helps the facilitator to communicate a sense of timing to the participants. Telling participants that they have a limited time to complete the exercise in, and giving them constant time-checks, helps in accelerating the problem solving process by re-focussing them on and reviving the point of concentration. Eventually, this brings about an intuitive sense of timing and pace that will enable the group to bring the scenes to a natural closure. "Timing is perceiving (sensing); it is an organic response which cannot be taught by lecture. It is the ability to handle the multiple stimuli occurring within a setting... It is to know objective reality and to be free to respond to it" (Spolin, 1963: 34).

#### *Evaluation:*

The facilitator's final area of responsibility is to engage the students in a period of evaluation subsequent to the improvisation problem. This period should be seen as a time to "...establish objective vocabulary, and direct communication [should be] made possible through non-judgmental attitudes, group assistance in solving a problem, and clarification of the point of concentration" (Spolin, 1963: 26). It is an important time to

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<sup>9</sup> Although it is important for the participant to investigate the 'self' it is also imperative that he is open to learning from the others participating in the exercise with him. Objectivity in an improvisation allows for the participant to involve personal responses while assimilating other influences and information and responding accordingly.

reiterate the non-culpability of each individual so that there is no anxiety or guilt regarding the problem and its resolution or lack thereof. Judgement and its associated social quantifiers: right and wrong, good and bad, are to be recognised as personal prejudice or generalisations, and a concerted effort should be made on the part of the facilitator to eliminate such terms from the group's vocabulary and thinking.

With the emphasis on objectivity there is the concurrent recognition of all participants as equals and with equality comes the removal of all sensitivities regarding evaluation. The participants learn to assess other aspects: did they keep to the point of concentration? Were they involved enough individually? And importantly, did they communicate and interpret what was intended?

#### Actor-audience relationship:

The final question mentioned above brings to the fore the extremely important relationship that is formed between the actors and audience, and the two-way communication that exists in the "*life*" that is the improvisational theatre entity (Slade, 1968: 9). The participant-actors will become aware of what is "actually communicated, not what was 'filled in' (by either the actor or the audience)" (Spolin, 1963: 27). The participants learn to assume nothing, and to evaluate only what they have actually seen, which makes it the responsibility of the actor to adequately clarify the stage reality for his audience. The electricity that keeps this relationship between the audience and the actor *alive* is the realisation that the audience is an "organic part of the theatrical experience", they are part of the stage experience and not passive outsiders looking on in judgement, but rather part of the problem solving process (Spolin, 1963: 13). When the actor-participant begins to assume the "host's responsibility" for his audience (Spolin, 1963: 5), all nervous tension is gone and replaced by the realisation that the audience is there to share in a "personal experience, not [an] artificial simulation" (Spolin, 1963: 13).

The audience, once involved in a situation like this, begins to assess the acting problem presented and not the scene itself, which makes the situation more pleasurable for actor



and audience, who are collectively willing the scene to evolve to solution. The audience attends theatre, not to be “led by the nose”, not to be given someone’s life story, or even to identify with the actor’s tired and “handed-down emotions” but to witness the *theatre reality* which should be a “world where every human predicament, riddle, or vision can be explored, a world of magic” (Spolin, 1963: 13).

This personal and communal contact is the ultimate desired effect of an improvised performance, but there is also a grey area which comes to one’s attention when looking at the actor-spectator improvised-connection. When one sees the earlier work of Brook, with the International Centre of Theatre Research, the actor-spectator relationship seems to be symptomatic of what can go wrong with public/audience improvisation. Brook’s public work took the form of an interactive improvisation using simple exercises in sound creation, allowing the sound to become a vehicle for the “pour[ing] out” of emotion (Brook, 1975). One notices during the exercises on the video (entitled *The Empty Space*, 1975) that a vague comparison is being drawn between the acts of “participation” and “joining in” on an improvisation (Brook, 1993a, a factor which Brook himself points out in a speech delivered later in his career). These improvisations involved semi-planned (on the part of the facilitator-actors) exercises and an audience’s reaction to these exercises. On the video, however, it becomes quite obvious that the *participants* were, in some cases the opposite – they were *joining in* and not immersing themselves sufficiently to feel the “moment”.

But when one truly achieves that “moment” of contact; it is a “golden hour...of unforgettable joy” made possible by allowing the unconscious to flow in a simple and natural way (Slade, 1968: 4). Brook, too, believes that the improvisational experience should culminate in “a moment of deep meaning, [which comes after]...a chain of moments which start on a simple, natural level, lead us towards intensity, then carry us away again” (Brook, 1991: 83). Brook uses the analogy of the “Golden Fish” to explain this moment of “perfect transparency” (Brook, 1991: 84). The *golden fish* can only be caught with the perfectly constructed net; the performance as the net therefore, needs to have just the right elements, to catch this fish. And the audience, once caught ‘with’ the



fish, will have the acute quality of awareness that facilitates a release of the “hidden collective potential of thoughts, feeling, myth and trauma” that is so powerful that the audience lives one “collective impression”, one “shared experience” (Brook, 1991: 82).

This raises a small query in the minds of many, however, namely: how would it be possible, or even feasible to present your audience with a “fresh theatrical experience” nightly? The answer may quite simply lie in the presentation of the theatre reality and not in the actual change of subject matter or content. As Slade puts it: “repetition can be tolerated and approved if it contains the illusion of immediate spontaneity also. For this can only be present if a re-enactment or reliving is there - It must have *life*” (1968: 9). So although the ideal may be a “first creation” every night, one can only be expected to be spontaneous and every director can come to accept and tolerate “adaptation for a good purpose ...” (Slade, 1968: 9).

#### Conclusion:

It is interesting to note what the practitioners believed to be the additional benefits to the unconscious learning of stage techniques. Slade and Hodgson and Richards believe that in the greater picture improvisation can ultimately lead to a more fully rounded and balanced individual. As a social skill, improvisation can stimulate the wit and spontaneous conversation of an individual; increasing speed of reply. And because the exercise is executed in a friendly atmosphere where there has been a gradual ridding of tensions which become replaced by a genuine and lasting self-confidence, the participant can even overcome what Slade terms “speed anxiety”, which is related to stammering (Slade, 1968: 3).

Dramatic improvisation is, in Hodgson and Richards’ opinions, the only form that “...can fully use man in the exploration of himself in the living situation...as a personal experience ...realised through improvisation” (1966: 21). So, if the proper (socio-political) study of mankind is man, then it follows that the “best way of studying [man] is in relationships with people and things” (Hodgson and Richards, 1966: 19). During the

improvisation process “all distortions of character and personality slowly fade away, for true self-identity is far more exciting than the falseness of withdrawal, egocentricity, exhibitionism, and the need for social approval. Hodgson and Richards believe this to be the case because they have recognised a marked difference in effectiveness of learning processes between normal theatrical training and improvisation. For them the difference is comparable to the difference between knowing and being told (1966: 19). When one is told one understands with the mind only. True conviction and total knowing comes when one finds-out for oneself, and comprehends a situation on all levels.

We realise that during each respective practitioner’s time there would have been much scepticism and tentativeness regarding the use of the newly-forming term and techniques of improvisation. The time frame that some of them worked in restricted the amount of experimentation they were willing to undertake in investigating improvisation possibilities. Those avant-garde practitioners who came to work either as contemporaries or followers of these practitioners had the, arguably, easier task of merely moulding semi-formulated techniques to suite their more political aims. Because of the work of these pioneering individuals we witness the birth of two extremely important realms where improvisation has been widely used.

The first realm is that of theatre-in-education (TIE), drama-in-education (DIE) and the second is theatre-for-development (TFD). The first of these areas warrants mentioning because of the practitioners’ widespread use of the techniques of improvisation in their teaching, but do not fall within the field of this study. It would, however, be interesting to investigate the principles of forerunners in the field of drama-in-education like Brian Way, not only because of his influence on more modern day practitioners like Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, and John O’Toole, in Britain and Nellie McCaslin<sup>10</sup>, in the United States of America, but also because of the undoubted influence he has had on Robin Malan and Zakes Mda in South Africa. Mda was also influenced, however, by the second school of thought that was born during the avant-garde period, one which saw theatre as a means of change in society.

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<sup>10</sup> Who calls her practice “creative dramatics”.



TFD practitioners, who were instrumental in influencing the Marxist nature of the avant-garde period, like Augusto Boal, Joseph Moreno and Paulo Freire, have also not been included in this study because of the more educational orientation of their theories. Their theories were exemplary, however, of the political and developmental consciousness which would come to be associated with improvisation and its techniques in the future, not only with the avant-garde movement, but also with workers' and workshop theatre of apartheid South Africa.

The following chapter therefore, deals with those who advanced the field of improvisation in the theatrical realm, and developed a form of theatre which could be used as a political weapon to conscientise those oppressed by misinformation.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **The Avant-garde Theatre**

The practitioners of the so called “avant-garde theatre” or “experimental theatre” movement, which dominated international theatre for much of the twentieth century, were a segment of the first to make a break away from the rigid structures that had prevented previous practitioners from utilising improvisation to its full potential. Although the various endeavours were stylistically diverse, the practitioners were united in their desire to break away from, and rebel against, what they perceived as the bourgeois sentiments that had dominated theatre trends of the time. These bourgeois sentiments were identified, by many practitioners, as prominent in the literature-dominated forms of realism, naturalism and romanticism. As a result most of the avant-garde practitioners showed a desire to return to basics; to access their audience on an organic and human level, where they could make direct contact with their socialised audience rather than lull them into complacency.

Most believed that a return to more universal (often physical and even tonal) means of communicating their message to their audience would, in turn, convey the “adversarial position” the avant-garde practitioners held within the traditional culture, while highlighting their need to “emerge in opposition to an established, dominant culture – an ensconced and static culture” (Aronson, 2000: 10). Improvisation was the tool that most effectively aided them in discovering the intrinsic elements of theatre and provided a means of generic contact between the members of a group or collective. Most of the practitioners found the philosophies of Marxism and communism to be the most appropriate political affiliations, because the principles of these movements advocated the communal living and societal consciousness that many of the practitioners wanted to cultivate. Improvisation also helped many of these loosely structure forms to find the means of expressing the “integrity and non-commercial” nature of their art to their immediate community, and allowed them to investigate new possibilities in the realms of space and performance (Roose-Evans, 1970: 168).



The following chapter is intended to be an *overview* of the theories and practices of the most prominent practitioners in this particular field (more specifically those who employed improvisation) and is therefore based on more general impressions of said practices and their associated groups. The limited nature of this particular study would not allow for any embellishment and investigation that was not essential to the author's intention. The intention in this case was to provide readers with an initial idea of many practitioners' feelings and practices; an idea which could then act as a starting point from which more in-depth research could be launched. One specific discussion, which could not be over-expanded was that of happenings, mentioned on page 58 of this chapter. Because there were so many practitioners in this particular field, Allan Kaprow, John Cage, Jackson MacLow and Michael Kirby to name a few, all of whom had widely diversified methodologies and approaches to performance and performance art, it would have been beyond the boundaries of this particular investigation to address all of them individually. For this reason the assessments of a few contemporaries of these particular artists have been selected to act as an overview of the kind of impressions the happening movement, as a whole, left on those exposed to it.

#### Russia - The Birthplace of the Avant-garde:

The initial response on the part of Russian directors like Vsevolod Meyerhold and Alexander Tairov to the stagnation that dominated theatre in the first half of the twentieth century, because of the lack of innovation in the realism and naturalism movements, was to become more concerned with the *form* of the play than the *content*. Meyerhold went so far as to begin viewing the actors as mere *puppets* rather than fully rounded humans and "psychological being[s]" (Roose-Evans, 1970: 21).

Meyerhold dabbled in creating correspondence between colour and emotions in order to "convey not the feelings of the individual characters but purified 'extracts' of emotion" (Roose-Evans, 1970: 22). But Meyerhold's most significant advancement in the area of improvisation was with his "*cabotin*" and the respective "*cabotinage*" method of acting. Meyerhold came to believe that the techniques of circus and mime were a means of

accessing a language far “superior to words”. So the *cabotin* was Meyerhold’s idea of the perfect actor (in Roose-Evans, 1970: 23):

...a strolling player; the cabotin is a kinsman to the mime, the historian, and the juggler; the cabotin can work miracles with his technical mastery; the cabotin keeps alive the tradition of the true art of acting.

Meyerhold’s wish was to revive the primordial elements of the theatre like mask, gesture and mystical plot, which had been utilised by the Greeks and Japanese. Cabotinage, Meyerhold believed, “would help the actor rediscover those basic laws of theatricality and would bring about a renaissance in the theatre of improvisation” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 23). He emphasised the skill of this figure, that was reminiscent of the *commedia dell’arte* masked clowns, and his ability to shift “character and situation with great technical mastery” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 23). But the most commendable feature, in Meyerhold’s eyes, of such a performer was his “grotesque” delivery (Meyerhold in Brandt, 1998: 134). Meyerhold believed that the grotesque element of the cabotinage performance, that was now made available for practitioners to use, was an essential vehicle for challenging the fossilised aesthetics of realism. The grotesque became an element which proved to sharpen the audience’s senses by mixing opposites and creating harsh incongruities.

Meyerhold’s experimentation in the area of spatial modifications was in keeping with the *carnavalesque* feeling of the grotesque; he even tried using spaces like taverns and music halls in a kind of supper-theatre atmosphere for his performances. Although the performances still required the “spectator [to] remain an observer”, the modified space and feel of the performance allowed the actors to begin to move in and amongst their audience (Roose-Evans, 1970: 24).

Later in his career, Meyerhold came under the influence of Chinese and Japanese theatre forms, such as the Kabuki and Noh (and even Kathakali dance theatre from India). These theatre forms, which appealed to the audience’s imagination, coupled with the theories of association – from Pavlov, who seemed to be “fashionable” at the time, led Meyerhold



along a train of thought which drew him further and further away from improvisation. It led him to develop his theories regarding “bio-mechanics” which required the actors to be “...part athletes, part acrobats, part animated machines” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 28). So by this stage he required actors to execute every movement and gesture in performance so that their delivery would appear “...calculated, controlled and [as a result] never spontaneous” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 28).

To Alexander Tairov, Meyerhold’s most noteworthy contemporary, this development made Meyerhold’s actors no more than “mere puppets in the hands of the director” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 31). Instead Tairov’s theories about improvisation picked up where Meyerhold left off with the *commedia dell’arte* train of thought, asserting that theatre is an art form that should be executed by “master actors who were capable of improvising upon an idea...and developing it before an audience” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 31). Tairov believes that the “main creator in the theatre is the master-actor”: a multi-talented individual who can only find his place in a company that has all the “talents of ballet, opera, circus, music hall and drama” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 31).

The resulting work from such a versatile and multitalented group of actors would then undoubtedly be eclectic; a “synthetic theatre” which allowed for the “synthesis of all the arts”, a theatre in which the audience could be aware that they were witnessing a great feat of artistic brilliance (Roose-Evans, 1970: 31).

Part of Tairov’s “artistic brilliance” was to be found in the musicality of his theatre. Music was to be the underlying principle of all of Tairov’s pieces, and the actors were to be like “musical instruments”; instruments so well tuned that they could master the rhythm of a piece to the extent that they could play it “not merely rhythmically but a-rhythmically” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 32).

After such a promising birth in Russia, the avant-garde theatre in this region ground to a halt with the introduction of the “doctrinaire plays” of the Stalinist regime. The Communist Party required all productions to be about “socialist realism” and as a result,

for almost twenty years, the Soviet stage which was “the greatest in the world [at that time], suffered an eclipse” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 34).

Jacques Copeau:

Called the “Father of Modern Theatre” by James Roose-Evans, Jacques Copeau could be considered more as a practitioner who revived the *old* than innovated the *new*. Like most of his contemporaries, Jacques Copeau believed that the realism of the stage had become too “cumbersome”, not only physically; in the area of machinery and showy effects, but also in the verbal arts; where it had become weighed down by “artificial rhetoric” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 53). Copeau’s solution is one that goes back to basics by stripping the stage down to its bare minimum: without footlights or proscenium arch and with décor used only sparingly. He chose, instead, to utilise atmospheric lighting and one or two properties, in the hope that detailed perfection in acting could be facilitated, in the absence of superfluous “theatrical elements” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 55).

Although stylistically Copeau advocated the physicality and rhythm of the Kabuki performances, he did not force these movements upon the actors. On the contrary he tried to let the choreography of a piece develop “...organically from the text”, because like Tairov, Copeau believed that there were inherent rhythms underlying the text which needed to be *heard* and *felt* before movement could be put to a piece (Roose-Evans, 1970: 54).

When Copeau came to teach his actors how to discover and refine these inherent rhythms for themselves, he was predictably drawn, like many before him, to the techniques of *commedia dell’arte*. Copeau visualises the study of *commedia dell’arte*, and the “spontaneous skills” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 57) that the form precipitated, as a means of creating the “modern comedy form[:] capable of bringing people together in a communion of laughter and recognition” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 56).



Another element of *commedia dell'arte* (and of Japanese Noh plays) that was able to aid Copeau in his theatrical endeavours was the mask. Copeau discovered the mask's possibilities in the area of play-making or text creation when he asked his actors, with the help of the mask, to improvise around themes and without texts. Along with the mask, the discipline of these two art forms (*Commedia dell'arte* and Noh) seemed to be an inspiration for Copeau, because he placed great stress on the "physical and technical expertise of the actors, and wanted his students to feel free to use mime, dance, acrobatics, improvisation, as a means of dramatic expression" (Roose-Evans, 1970: 57).

But one of the most important revelations in Copeau's actor-training programme was his suggestion of a more "communal theatre and a more communal society" (Roose-Evans, 1970: 57). In this communal society the actors are expected to allow all areas of life to evolve in connection with theatre – improvising songs and games at all celebrations (birthdays etc.) and festivals. He realised that the "organic theatre group must also be a way of life as well as a way of work<sup>11</sup>." Copeau expects his actors to lose their ego by undertaking an "intense life of self-exploration" in order to "strip away their outward personalities, mannerisms, habits, vanity, neuroses, tricks, clichés, and stock responses", all of which are socially learnt behaviours, "until a higher state of perception [could be] found" (Roose-Evans, 1970: 61). Copeau's only role, as a director/facilitator, in this community is as a "spiritual guide, [to help]...filter, choose, explain, balance [and] harmonise" different themes, discoveries and interactions within the community (Roose-Evans, 1970: 57).

Copeau's work was able to stimulate so many others in the theatre industry because he had found the "organic" and basic human quality that is the quest of most avant-garde practitioners. As a critic once said (Vincent in Roose-Evans, 1970: 60):

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<sup>11</sup> But as Copeau was later to realise, it is virtually impossible to have actors living and working constantly in the same environment. Copeau discovered that it was not a viable situation, a conclusion that Grotowski also came to draw later in his career.

They have definitely detoxicated the theatre of its lyrical verbiage, they have done the work of surgeons. They have enlarged the field of expression, all in knowing how to go back to the sources of convention...like wise children, the Copiaux have known how to prune, to simplify, to clarify.

Those whom he influenced were individuals like Brook, Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, who were not only interested in the minimalism of his *poor theatre* (before it was officially given the name by Grotowski), but also in Copeau's search for the "essential action,...sound,...[and] emotion" (Roose-Evans, 1970: 60). These practitioners also share the real aim of Copeau's theatre with him: the pursuit of a "spiritual rather than a physical goal" (Roose-Evans, 1970: 61).

[Copeau] created theatre as an institution, a way of life, an inspiration which went far beyond the mere theatrical experience.... [He] want[ed] to institute an order...of abnegation, faith and love, illuminated by reason, humanized by common sense sustained by discipline"

- Ley-Piscator, 1967: 130

#### Brecht and Piscator – the Fathers of Epic Theatre:

Although both of these practitioners lay claim to the *invention* of the term "Epic Theatre", Piscator is more fair-minded in his explanation of who was first – "The epic theatre was invented by me primarily in production and by Brecht primarily in the script" (Piscator in Roose-Evans, 1970: 67). Both Piscator and Brecht acknowledged the potential for theatre as a medium to instruct its audience and, as they hoped, somehow move them to change. Epic theatre became the ultimate theatre for instruction, in their opinion, and "...part of the social struggle, a means by which the working class could define itself" (Roose-Evans, 1970: 66).

This political motivation is in keeping with the Marxist aims of much of Piscator's theatrical endeavours, including his "Agitprop" theatre, which is about the most



improvised of his techniques<sup>12</sup>. Piscator worked under the principle that “the play on the stage should act as an advance-guard in the Proletarian war of liberation...” (Piscator in Innes, 1972: 25). Each performance, therefore, is relatively “impromptu” because of the Marxist emphasis on social relevance and because each performance is expected to cater for its immediate audience (Innes, 1972: 25). Agitprop theatre is very localised, catering for its specific (limited) audience/community and speaking to them on their “home ground” so as not to alert the police (Innes, 1972: 25). Agitprop theatre also uses amateur actors who are unrehearsed and frequently unskilled, and utilises simplified characters so as to cater for an audience which is also predominantly uneducated, ignorant of theatrical convention and generally uninterested in art. Because of this lack of interest in art and the non-professional actors, the scripts had to be simplified and limited to 30-minutes, dealing with open, non-subtle characters in equally ordinary situations (so that the actors could cope with learning the part and the audience could associate with the characters and content and remain focused).

One of the most important features of Agitprop theatre, however, is its ability to awaken an audiences’ awareness of class-struggle: “The plays had to deal with social injustice in general and end with a call to revolution”, a call to action which is the ultimate link between the motivations of Brecht and Piscator (Innes, 1972: 26). Both practitioners wanted, like the other avant-garde artists, to break from the “ideological, dramaturgical, spatial and technical abrogation of the bourgeois theatre” (Piscator in Innes, 1972: 24). And like many others they returned to the ancient Greek model and the relationship between audience and theatre; where theatre was the “cultural centre of society” (Innes, 1972: 25).

Epic theatre, and what Piscator terms his “Total Theatre”, are the ultimate vehicles for “serious practical sociology, [with which Piscator] aim[s] to transform society by subjecting ideologies to close scrutiny” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 67). The spectator is no longer allowed to submit to an Epic Theatre experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) through simple empathy with the characters in the play. Both Piscator and

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<sup>12</sup> “Agitprop” is an acronym for agitation and propaganda.

Brecht used the linguistic concision and objectivity from the Noh Theatre, and the objectivity of Kabuki-type acting, to inform their storyteller or “compère” figure (Innes, 1972: 105), whose performance entails his “demonstrat[ing]” the role without emotional involvement (Roose-Evans, 1970: 69). There is an amount of distance created, therefore, between performer and audience by the impersonal nature of the storyteller’s delivery and by the subsequent lack of empathy allowed in the relationship between actor and spectator. This leaves the audience’s consciousness open to receive the message of the play directly from the author himself, because there is no longer the convention of the “autonomous writer or director” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 68). Both Brecht and Piscator ended up employing a direct address from the author in their work (reminiscent of the Greek theatre) so as to give a chorus-like interpretation or commentary on the events in the play<sup>13</sup>.

Although these two practitioners do not place much credence in the concept of improvisation (particularly) as a means of accessing their proletariat audience, they are important practitioners to consider because of their investigation of a “universality of spirit” that would come to influence many other community-focused improvisation techniques later on (Ley-Piscator, 1967: 92).

### The Grand Magic Circus:

The Grand Magic Circus was a group of performers, lead by Jerome Savary, who started working in Paris in the 1960s and who closely followed many of the teachings of Antonin Artaud, especially his concepts of the Theatre of Cruelty. Artaud believed that the theatre needs to return to the “truthful precipitates of dreams” in order to find itself again. Artaud, along with the many others, was rebelling against the “rhetorical acting then fashionable” in bourgeois circles (Roose-Evans, 1970: 75-76). To replace the poetry of language Artaud proposed “...a poetry of space, employing such means as music, dance, painting, kinetic art, mime, pantomime, gesture, chanting, incantations, architectural

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<sup>13</sup> The Ancient Greek chorus was a group of people on stage during a performance of a tragedies and comedies who acted as the voice of the people, speaking on their behalf, making commentary on the action and interacting with the characters.



shapes, lighting” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 76). Artaud intended to employ all of these techniques in the search for a “topical and psychological” theatre, during the preparation for which, the actors are to forget themselves and forget theatre “and lie in wait for the images that are...in [them]... naked, excessive...” (Artaud in Roose-Evans, 1970: 76). He seems to be advocating an intrinsic or ‘natural’ theatre; one which returns to the “primitive sources of inspiration”, identifying the rift that has been caused (by socialised living) between the body and mind (the intellect and feeling), and then tries to heal that rift (Roose-Evans, 1970: 77).

Artaud was one of the first to utilise what he termed “malleable” spaces (Artaud in Roose-Evans, 1970: 78). In these malleable spaces, which were vast open areas like barns and hangers, there was no distinction between the stage area and auditorium and as a result the action was able to be performed amongst and around and along-side the audience, as opposed to merely in front of them.

This freedom of movement among the audience was one of the first areas that the Grand Magic Circus picked up on they, however, took this dynamic one step further – “inviting the audience to dance with them” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 83). Grand Magic Circus’ productions were the ultimate in audience participation, improvised anew each evening under the energetic direction of Jerome Savary. The loose structure of the presentation and the feeling of anticipation, which was fostered in the participants, made each performance unique and worked to generate an “atmosphere of extraordinary tension and excitement” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 84). Aesthetically, the performance was part “fiesta, carnival, cabaret, fairground, dance-hall, orgy and revivalist meeting” all rolled into one every evening (Roose-Evans, 1970: 84). It was the kind of production that got the audience caught up in the exuberance of the encounter and functioned to “release,... exhilarate... and liberate...” all those involved (Roose-Evans, 1970: 84).

But what motivated such productions? Savary, like many before him, was pre-occupied with the problem of the “isolation of modern man faced with an over-complex society” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 86). He too sought to find the *humanness* in productions, by using

non-professional actors to create community projects in unconventional spaces. Entertainment media like boxing and street theatre were utilised; forms that are not necessarily literary forms of expression, because Savary wanted to include, rather than exclude, all who wanted to partake; both the “intelligentsia” and the “illiterate” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 86). For Savary there was an “undeclared war between the intellectual and the intuitive” and in his fight to unleash the intuitive his priorities dictated that the “experience must come first [and the] analysis...later” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 87).

#### Charles Marowitz:

Marowitz is a strong believer in the use of improvisation and he concurs with most of the practitioners that preceded him in seeing the act of improvisation as a “primordial form of theatre” (Marowitz, 1961: 124). Marowitz, however, traces improvisation and its use even further back than the Ancient Greeks to a time when it was an “...instinctive drive which first made man imitate the life around him” (Marowitz, 1961: 124). Marowitz asserts that drama and improvisation were considered so “divine” in the eyes of the ancients, that it was considered the only thing worthy of utilisation in worshipping their gods (Marowitz, 1961: 124). Marowitz does realise, however, that many practitioners, like Brook and Grotowski, have come to equate improvisation with a “free-for-all”, to the extent that it’s “...intrinsic worth and practical application [have been] lost” (Marowitz, 1961: 129).

Marowitz believes that all that one needs to have in the war against “laxity, which dwindles spontaneous acting into horseplay” is a “particular purpose” (Marowitz, 1961: 133)<sup>14</sup>. This *particular purpose* comes in the form of a solid dramatic reason and can be: the creation of moods, the playing of objectives, the expression of character or even the demonstration of tempi and rhythms.

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<sup>14</sup> This “particular purpose” is reminiscent of Viola Spolin’s “point of concentration” mentioned in Chapter Two.



Improvisation is therefore, broadly used by Marowitz for the “emotional limbering” of an actor and “as a production-stimulant” (Marowitz, 1961: 129). Marowitz advocates the use of improvisation in conjunction with the text, to “supplement play-production; not to compete with it” (Marowitz, 1961: 135).

During the process of *emotional limbering* the actor is able to overcome the natural tendency to *apply acting* where demanded; this applied acting works under the assumption that, there is no *effect* the actor cannot achieve by regulating the instrument of his body accordingly. Marowitz, like many other practitioners of the late twentieth century in Europe and America blames social conditioning in this regard, believing this kind of behaviour to be a response to “economic and ego considerations” (Marowitz, 1978: 52).

Improvising was (and is) the means of breaking the chains of socialisation because “...once [the actor] is on his own, free of the oppressive influence of the script and stage, there is a good chance that he will not lapse into his conditioned-reflexes and perhaps quite accidentally, he will begin drawing from the real self and producing honest reactions” (Marowitz, 1961: 130-131). Therefore, in improvising, the actor is able to reveal something of himself, either consciously or unconsciously, which in turn helps the actor to come to the realisation of *self* and how he reacts to situations: “The character reveals the actor because the character *is* the actor...” (Marowitz, 1961: 131). Improvisation also gives the actor the opportunity to explore emotion and feeling in its “full-blooded” form, without social inhibition and within the natural progression of events. The actor can then apply these discoveries to a text, as a kind of *plotting* during the initial phases of a production, a step which aids in giving the actor “...a curious sense of ownership”, because he has discovered the character and given it traits of his own (Marowitz, 1961: 13). The actor is, in effect, creating the character - it is not given to him, and as a result “a kinship grows up between the character and actor which is a result of total identification” (Marowitz, 1961: 136).

As an offshoot of this, “improvisation makes [the actor]...a keener critic of the drama, and consequently, a better interpreter of it” to the extent that the actor is able to assess himself and his fellow actors (Marowitz, 1961: 131). This process helps in maintaining the relationship between acting and value-judgement. The actors continuously assess their own credibility, contact with their respective character, and inner truthfulness, so that they are able to “...constantly censur[e] those faults which invalidated the improvisation” (Marowitz, 1961: 134). Then, in looking critically at their fellow-players the actors are able to “to question the sincerity of *their* responses and the logic of *their* actions” (Marowitz, 1961: 134). Finally, because they all assess an exercise together and give each other feedback, it reaches a point where no one feels culpable – they are “equally liable...” the discussion is candid and critical, while still being casual and utilising general terms (Marowitz, 1961: 134).

In this scenario Marowitz’s director is responsible, not only “to make the actor aware of the hurdles”, but to help the actor to develop for himself the “levitation” required to clear those hurdles (Marowitz, 1978: 50). He does, however, advocate keeping the director’s interference down to a minimum, especially when it comes to over-explaining exercises. Since the overriding aim of all of the improvisations is to create a spontaneous, improvisatory flow of feeling, it is fatal to flow and integrity if one announces, in advance, the results which are intended to accrue - “nothing destroys spontaneity more than a spelled-out thesis” (Marowitz, 1972: 89)<sup>15</sup>. Instead, Marowitz recommends giving “...the thread of the story, and...where it takes place” as well as having the “the characters ...roughly sketched in..., and the general direction of the scene briefly described” (Marowitz, 1961: 135). But these descriptions too, are kept “deliberately vague and sketchy so that all the pertinent details of character and action are provided by the actors themselves” (Marowitz, 1961: 135). So in this situation the actors are creating, but the difference lies in the fact that the actors do not have to *make up* a story, their energies can be better employed in “playing” and not “play-making” because Marowitz feels that improvisation, by nature, should not involve elaborate construction (Marowitz, 1961: 135).

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<sup>15</sup> To avoid Spolin’s verbal predeterminations, see Chapter One.



Ultimately, because so much of the creative energy comes from the actor and is precipitated in spontaneous circumstances, Marowitz believes that improvisation is the purest form of theatre:

Pure, because it is uncluttered by conventional assists; pure too, because it utilises the raw material of the actors personality from which all performances are made. Most pure, because it issues from that psychic instinct which, many aeons ago, made one Neanderthal imitate the prancing of a stag, and another Neanderthal sit up and take notice.

- Marowitz, 1961: 141

#### Ensembles and Collectives - The Living Theatre and Open Theatre:

The Living Theatre and the Open Theatre were started in the 1960s, along with similar projects, like the Performance Group (under the leadership of Richard Schechner) and the Manhattan Theatre project. All the collectives of this period chose to focus their energies on identifying and accessing the *whole* human being in their productions. Schechner best put their sentiments into words when he says:

Most important by far is our struggle to expose our feelings, to reveal ourselves, to be open, receptive, vulnerable; ...to use impulse and feeling in our work. And to believe that excellence in art is, ultimately, a function of wholeness as a human being.

- Schechner in Roose-Evans, 1970: 103

This search, for “man in his wholeness” was possibly sparked by Artaud, when he asserted that theatre should contact its audience at a “depth of feeling that precedes the dissection of man into social and psychological categories” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 103).

The unique social structures of this period, the 1960s, made for a “...bubbling mix of interlinked sub-cultures”, it was a period of growth for the *global village* and the electronic mass society (Marwick, 1994: 34). Society was at a crossroads, where

“mindless commercialism and mass-marketing” threatened to overshadow the “doing-your-own-thing, participatory, aspect of sixties sub-cultures” (Marwick, 1994: 34). In almost Marxist<sup>16</sup> fashion the avant-garde groups sought to bring “members of the theatre-going upper and middle classes into contact with the tenets and practices of ‘the underground’ and the ‘alternative culture’”, this alternative culture which wanted to, in the words of Judith Malina, “demand everything -- total love, an end to all forms of violence and cruelty such as money, prisons, people doing work they hate. We can have tractors and food and joy” (Malina in Marwick, 1994: 34).

Most of these theatre-group communities chose ensemble work because of its collaborative nature, which gelled with political aspirations. The creative process of ensemble work allowed all those involved to remain responsible for their ideas throughout the entire development- and production process and at the core of the ensemble approach were two fundamental principles: "global responsibility" and "interdisciplinarity" (Lewis, 2002: 28).

*Global responsibility* means that the entire ensemble is responsible for the work, which is evenly distributed amongst all the members and *interdisciplinarity* means that each of the artists is involved in more than one of the various practical aspects of theatre creation and production, applying their talents wherever necessary. Anyone and everyone can contribute at any level or stage in the process without having to have their creative input go through the hierarchical chain-of-command: director – producer – etc. These two principles make the “ensemble model an open, adaptive system, rather than a closed one” (Lewis, 2002: 28). The fact that everyone is involved does not work to the detriment of the quality of the piece, or make the end result less professional either, because the entire collective is responsible for a production’s success or failure and the ensemble is made of specialist, rather than generalists; “artists who have mastered multiple disciplines” (Lewis, 2002: 28).

The Living Theatre, under the leadership of Julian Beck and Judith Malina, became the seminal example of experimental and avant-garde theatre in the 1960s. Their group

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<sup>16</sup> See the introduction for a clearer explanation of the allusions of this term.



embodied the spirit and ambitions of many other collectives of that time, with their desire to “increase conscious awareness, to stress the sacredness of life, [and] to break down the walls” (Aronson, 2000: 21). One of their main influences was Erwin Piscator, and his notion of theatre “...as a force of social and political change effected through non-Aristotelian means but with reason, clarity, and communication” (Aronson, 2000: 49). Beck and Malina regarded traditional theatre as “merely a salve for society, enabling the public to return in safety to its bourgeois way of life” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 104). Like those before them, they sought to reunite the body and feelings with its over-intellectualised mind, to create a more unified human being.

In the areas of form and aesthetics, the Living Theatre brought together into “one indissoluble whole: happenings, popular music, dance and drama” (Marwick, 1994: 34). Their productions seemed to be a visual and mental assault on the audience, like “a modern Dionysian rite” where, like others before them, the focus was a communal one which returned to the Ancient Greek model for inspiration (Marwick, 1994: 34). Julian Beck felt that the audience needed to “feel pain at a public ceremony, [as]...the route by which [the performers could] enable [the audience] to find the way back to [their] feelings so that they will never commit violence again” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 105-106).

The work of the Living Theatre sparked off the creation of the Open Theatre, which was started by one of the main actors of the Living Theatre: Joseph Chaikin. Chaikin goes so far as to name his conversations with Beck and Malina, as the single most influential inputs from his early career. Chaikin said, that “...none of [their conversations] involved exercises, acting, or specific techniques,... they did not inquire into stage behaviour or ritual. But they were free of all the aspirations and assumptions of established theatre” (Chaikin, 1972: 45).

The Open Theatre investigations began with Chaikin’s desire for his actors to, above all, “feel and understand”, so that they can be freed of their “inhibitions and prejudices and create a humanising kind of theatre” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 106). Chaikin wants to de-socialise the mind of his actors to take them back to a time when they were “vulnerable”,

a time when they had not yet closed off their “total human response” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 106). He advocates a kind of total identification with the part, (like Marowitz, 1961: 136) which the actor is able to achieve “when [he] responds to an imaginary stimulus, [and when] he himself chooses and shapes that stimulus. [The actor] has potential for a deep contact with that stimulus since it is privately chosen. This contact brings up the energy for the actor’s use” (Chaikin, 1972: 8) and this energy, that is now at the actor’s disposal, comes from past experiences; “his inner promptings, associations, that part of his life which is already lived” (Chaikin, 1972: 9).

This process is best illustrated by what Chaikin calls “jamming” (1972: 117). The term *jamming* is derived from jazz music and what jazz musicians call a “jam session”. Chaikin describes jamming as “the study of an emblem” and it seems to be a process one could equate to improvising with Viola Spolin’s ‘point of concentration’ (Chaikin, 1972: 116). During the process of jamming the actors are “...showed that there is a...great amount of inner material and music to draw from while staying with the same intention and words” (Chaikin, 1972: 116 & 117)<sup>17</sup>. Jamming entails

...one actor comes in and moves in contemplation of a theme, travelling within the rhythms, going through and out of the phrasing, sometimes reducing the whole thing to pure sound, all of it related to the emblem. Then another comes in and together they give way and open up on the theme. During the jamming, if the performers let it, the theme moves into associations, a combination of free and structured form.

-Chaikin, 1972: 116

So what the actors are trying to achieve is a balance “between control and surrender”; “...the actor experiences a dialectic between restraint and abandon; between the impulse and the form which expresses it; between the act and the way it is perceived by the audience” (Chaikin, 1972: 10).

Chaikin believes that ideally the actor would be motivated by, and be able to perform, that which he cares about most: “Through acting one can try to reflect the conditions of

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<sup>17</sup> The point of concentration is discussed in Chapter One.



living and behaving that the revolutionary actor is trying to achieve” (Chaikin, 1972: 11). But before an actor becomes revolutionary it is imperative for him to ignore and avoid the drive to “make it”, that impulse to “...please, to gain audiences and to make money” like Marowitz he fights the economic and ego consideration of socialised behaviour, because Chaikin believes that in order for the actor to open himself up for learning he has to be willing to fail so that he can go beyond the safe limits and become an adventurer (Chaikin, 1972: 56).

Essentially, Chaikin wants the actors to stretch themselves beyond the “limited or exclusive...cocoon” which is their “social milieu or environment” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 106). And as a tool for extending themselves beyond their cocoon, Chaikin recommends that an actor “...involve himself in different ways of perceiving besides his own” (Chaikin, 1972: 58). Chaikin advocates the kind of *field work* or research that is also utilised by many of the workshop theatre groups in South Africa – which entails going out into their local community and experiencing all kinds of people and situations – so that the actor does not have “...only a partial understanding of the dimension of his study” that is humanness, but a more comprehensive understanding (Chaikin, 1972: 58).

Joseph Chaikin’s actors were to be exposed, not only to the individual’s personal experiences but also to “different group-identity situations” like prisons, mental hospitals etc. - microcosmic situations that they would not normally encounter (Chaikin, 1972: 58). Chaikin then used these experiences to inform workshops called “worlds”: these were an attempt to understand certain “inner states which might be outside of the actor’s range of experiences – such as paranoia and euphoria. The object of the exercise was to involve other actors in this world without distorting it” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 106).

But in order to properly understanding the experience the actors had to develop a *closeness* in their relationships with one another. Once they began to trust each other they were able to access a kind of creativity that could not have been precipitated had they been uncomfortable in each other’s presence. This comfort is one which evolves as a result of their lifestyle: “living and performing as members of a commune” and finding

“communal points of reference and common vocabulary...” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 106 & 108).

Chaikin believes that only when ego is brought *back* into consideration can this relationship be put under strain, because ego precipitates a “climate of competition where it is necessary to prove one’s value” (Chaikin, 1972: 56). This competitive atmosphere is present in auditions, acting classes and even a single show and this is the reason why the Open Theatre was started: to help actors to concentrate on “...exploring and studying theatre rather than continually breaking this ever-changing process by having to perform in front of a public to the same format night after night” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 107).

Chaikin’s training process, therefore, is far more *open* – as the name of his collaborative suggests, he continually emphasises the need to “change, to explore and particularly to take risks” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 107) he realised that working with the “don’t knows” was perhaps more important than working with the “knows” (Chaikin, 1972: 57). Chaikin particularly enjoyed employing the workshop process because it requires the discipline of extensive physical and vocal training, and he can use the exercises as a means of accessing the inherit talent in those he works with. He believes: “There is no way to develop talent, only to invite it to be released”, and he also seems to think that some are talented while others aren’t; calling talent a “mysterious gift, no more equally distributed than bright sunny days over a year” (Chaikin, 1972: 154).

When it comes to defining his role and responsibilities as the “teacher”, Chaikin is exceptionally careful, because he acknowledges that he is helping each individual in developing their *talent*. To do this he looks for the “right steps for each student, and when [the student] is about to make his discovery, the teacher must disappear”, because if the teacher is to look for satisfaction of his own aims and goals at the point of discovery, the student will be stopped from fully discovering; the student will learn only what is true for the *teacher* and not find his *own* truth (Chaikin, 1972: 154).



During this entire process the student will glean the ability to have empathy for his fellow actors. As a result of the non-competitive environment, the actors work in unison during improvisations; supporting each other, to the point that there is no longer a distinction between the initiator and the follower, they are simply together – moving simultaneously. The actors will also learn to feel the “rhythm, ...dynamics, and...sensitivity” of any exercise and decipher that “...there is a kind of inner rhythm going on all the time in any single person” (Chaikin, 1972: 59). This intrinsic rhythm, as acknowledged by Tairov (among others), allowed the actors the opportunity to “let the body go”, and in doing so, they discovered a pattern, a dynamic and an intensity, that is unique to each individual and that changes as experience changes during the day. Once the actors have identified each person’s idiosyncratic rhythm, they also come to identify a “theme” in each individual’s rhythm, a theme that only people familiar with one another can construe (Chaikin, 1972: 59).

The rhythms of the individuals then begin to affect the energies in a room and work to “charge” the room, and the people in it, with an almost tangible electricity. Chaikin suggests that dramatic action is created by the “clash of rhythms” or the “rhythmic battle” that ensues between actors in an exercise, and this battle takes place without there necessarily being counterpoint of intention; “people...might be quite in accord on what they’re talking about” (Chaikin, 1972: 60). There are times when energies and arguments work in counterpoint and other times when rhythms and inner dynamics find unison, but in the end, it is the meeting and sometimes intermingling of the rhythms of individuals which creates the action and tension in an improvisation.

Ultimately, the aim of Chaikin’s training is to help the actor to analyse and criticise, with a view to understanding. An understanding that can only be achieved through improvisation and the development of the actor’s capacity for inquiry and intuition. For it is “the ‘inside’ of a situation which Chaikin want[s] to explore through perceptual and non-verbal improvisation and in this way come to a better understanding of the sub-text and psychological motivations of character” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 109). All of this is done, not so that the actors can necessarily perform for an audience, but with a view to

helping the actor to become a more rounded and open person. Chaikin asserts that the transition from workshop to performance is too traumatic because the emphasis of the two practices is completely different; disrupting both performance and player, therefore the performance is in no way as essential as the process of development.

#### The Bread and Puppet Theatre and happenings:

Chaikin established the Open Theatre in 1963, the same year that Peter Schumann began his work in the Bread and Puppet Theatre and Allan Kaprow had his first *happening* in New York. Both of these avant-garde theatre forms also seemed to draw on some of Artaud's concepts, and on the popular idea that theatre should return to its original and organic form. As Artaud says in *The Theatre and its Double*: "...to link the theatre to the expressive possibilities of forms, to everything in the domain of gestures, noises, colours, movements, etc., is to restore it to its original direction" (Artaud in Marowitz, 1972: 182). This is precisely what these two forms of eclectic theatre set out to do.

Neither Peter Schumann of Bread and Puppet Theatre nor those creating the happenings were creating for a theatre-going audience, regarding the "audience that does not go to the theatre as the best" (Roose-Evans, 1970: 121). Schumann wanted to perform for the proletariat audience: "the man on his way to work, or the family spending an hour in the park" (Roose-Evans, 1970: 121). Both performance forms were fighting the concept of the audience as a "formal tableau" that sits impassively watching the "doers" executing a performance that is "done-to" them (Marowitz, 1972: 185). Both the Bread and Puppet Theatre and the happenings groups recognised the performative quality of theatre, as opposed to other art forms, which made theatre the most conducive to influencing its spectators.

Richard Schechner, when referring to happenings (and to a lesser extent the Bread and Puppet Theatre) and the communion the producers of happenings seek to achieve with their audience, uses the example of the Greek chorus and the Dionysian festivals, to illustrate the power that theatre used to exert over the society it was performed for.



Schechner sees (like all those before him) performance as a “counterforce”; a means of breaking free of the constructs of socialised society particularly in the case of happenings, where:

Underneath whatever repressive machinery civilisation constructs to keep itself intact, a counterforce of great unifying, celebratory, sexual, and life-giving power continues to exert its overwhelming and joyous influence.

- Schechner, 1969: 227

Schechner calls the counterforce, and the will to break out of socialised behaviour, “freaking-out” and claims “...this special, ecstatic quality to be essentially theatrical” (Schechner, 1969: 228). But possibly the most important factor, which makes this ecstatic experience possible, is the communal focus of the performances: because theatre “in its communal forms...is both socially constructive and personally transcendental or ecstatic” (Schechner, 1969: 228). This thinking is what Schechner envisages as the future of art because it is “...linked to the development of social systems that are neither individualised nor commercialised” (Schechner, 1969: 228).

Schumann, of the Bread and Puppet Theatre, also sought this communal focus and celebratory reaction in his work. His theatre was an exciting combination of human and puppet interaction, taking place in spaces of all shape and size and using masks and enormous figures which towered above his audience. Schumann’s intention for his audience, however, is slightly more focused; “underlying his moral and political concerns there is a religious and poetic vision (in the world of experimental theatre this is a rarity) which chooses as its main symbols resurrection and redemption” (Roose-Evans, 1970: 121).

As a result the Bread and Puppet Theatre was the ultimate in community-focused theatre, allowing those who lived and worked in the local area to be involved, in not only the creation of the puppets, but at various levels of the production process, including the performance itself:

...each spectator was given a choice between staying outside and moving inside, between watching and doing... No one is asked to 'act' or do anything more extra-ordinary than play a little make believe.

- Roose-Evans, 1970: 124

And although Schumann remained unobtrusively involved in the action at all times, the work was left rough and untidy, because the process of contact between the (mostly unprofessional) actors and the members of the community, and their subsequent contact with Schumann's essential vision of God and man, were all more important than the stage craft. The gentleness, humour, caring and concern precipitated by there interactions were all part of the total action; "more – it [was] the base and ground from which all their work stem[med]" (Roose-Evans, 1970: 125).

The Bread and Puppet Theatre participants were therefore like the members of the Open Theatre, who could not separate the "quality of their life from their work", and as a result their improvisations took on the "complete conviction of a child" (Roose-Evans, 1970: 128). Schumann's actors did not have the polish and sophistication that most would expect of conventional performers but it was their deliberate amateurishness and naivety of performance which allowed them to contact their audience at just the right level so as to access the instinct to celebrate communally, an attitude which had been suppressed by socialised behavioural-conditioning.

The Bread and Puppet Theatre and happenings also shared a preference for oral tradition, which "naturally takes its shape from the changing culture it transmits" as opposed to dramatic literature, which is slightly solidified and reactionary making it a burden to culture it tries to represent (Schechner, 1969: 237). As Schechner so accurately points out: "...oral tradition is political in the widest sense. It cannot be created outside of a group, a community; and it cannot function without direct reference to the society in which it is embedded" (Schechner, 1969: 238). This was the reason why it became the ideal vessel for these two branches of community theatre (and so heavily influenced South African workers' and workshop theatre).



Although both those creating Bread and Puppet Theatre and happenings believed that the real impact of a performance was not in its endurance as a theatrical piece (because “shows are often unrepeated and unrepeatable...” (Schechner, 1969: 158)) but in the “personal repercussion” that it has on its audience, those who created the happenings did not believe that they necessarily needed to have an *audience* per-se, because they happen anywhere (Marowitz, 1972: 1). Whenever people were around to witness a happening and experience (or not experience), then there is art. Bread and Puppet Theatre on the other hand, depended on its audience, because it was made for, by and with, its audience.

The reason why those creating happenings believe the audience to be semi-superfluous is because there are essentially three different kinds of happening: the technological or electronic event – including electronic music and technological elements (described as “cold”), the “free-for-all happening” - the party gone wild, the one most audiences are familiar with (described as “uncontrolled”) and the “ceremony” - where “the participants are given a set of instructions which they are not to improvise on but simply to do” (Schechner, 1969: 163). When it comes to the so-called “audience” interacting with these three varieties of happening they can either be part of the action, where there is no distinctive line between the performers and the audience, or they are left to decipher the action for themselves and “make something of it” (Schechner, 1969: 158).

Therefore, if the Bread and Puppet Theatre is exemplary of the community focussed avant-garde theatre, then happenings are an example of the kind of anarchical improvised performance that can be created. Ultimately the happening process begins with a “score” which is detailed and prescribed, the group then prepare (sometimes 5-6 months) for a piece, as opposed to rehearsing for it, and finally utilise some degree of improvisation, although it is not completely off-the-cuff, in order to present the piece to their audience, who then decipher or participate (Marowitz, 1972: 183).

The happening performances are intended to place a “re-emphasis upon spectacle and noise and [to show] a particular desire to use these spontaneously” (Hodgson, 1972: 186), while taking its audience on a “tangential” journey which “...combines associative



variations on visual-oral themes, chang[ing] permutations, games, and trips (both everyday and psychedelic)”<sup>18</sup> (Schechner, 1969: 157). The happening toys with “modes of perception” (Schechner, 1969: 157-8) and is intended to be a “perceptual education...” (Schechner, 1969: 159). Happenings are intended to make the audience aware of both their inner and outer environments in new ways, by attempting to refresh the senses of sight and sound by transposing familiar activities into unfamiliar contexts.

Those involved in happenings seek to make a sweeping overhaul of theatre attitudes - extending theatre practitioner’s views of what theatre “legitimately” can be, and opening their minds to an “...entirely new range of possibilities” (Marowitz, 1972: 185). What could be problematic is the question of whether happenings are applicable or pertinent to the audience; when even the actors *involved* in the happening seem to perceive the performances as “largely expendable” (Marowitz, 1972: 1). This could be because all culpability is removed by the “chance techniques” - relieving all involved of the burden of choosing when to do something and what exactly to do (Marowitz, 1972: 1). Which then begs another question: does the happening, in fact, have a chance to make the “statement” for which it was originally intended? But perhaps it is the case, as Schechner points out, that happenings do not have any “themes or theses”, but rather that the lack of “pre-set meaning” is a meaning in itself (Schechner, 1969: 156). After considering all factors, one cannot help but consider the work of a group like the Bread and Puppet Theatre as more effective, because in having direct contact with their group they are more likely to invoke change, whereas the happening in itself is only as effective as those who participate in it or try to perceive it.

### Conclusion:

The theatre that followed the period of avant-garde experimentation could not help but be influenced by the diversified influences that had now been absorbed into the theatre form, including puppetry, artistic influences on colour and set design and technological and multimedia advances. Avant-garde theatre’s use of unusual spaces and changing the

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<sup>18</sup> As opposed to the linear dramatic structure/journey which provides its audience with a sense of destiny.



physical proximity of the performance to spectator, facilitated modifications to the concept of what accepted theatre was, including the important development of the *spect-actor*<sup>19</sup>. This meant the ultimate level of involvement for the audience – as part of the creative process. This new train of thought had influences on many tertiary areas, which now began to utilise theatre and its humanising properties: in the realms of education, psychology/psychotherapy, performance art and even the development of protest theatre – in that it facilitated the unique improvisation and research processes, now associated with workshop theatre. Essentially avant-garde theatre brought about a mindset that held the process of creation during rehearsals (or the pre-production phase) in just as high regard as the performance itself.

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<sup>19</sup> A concept made concrete by the terminology of Augusto Boal.

## **Chapter Three:**

### **South African Alternative Theatre**

At the core of forms such as theatre-for-development, people's theatre, community theatre, workers' theatre and workshop theatre in general, is politics; a perspective shared by most of the practitioners involved in these respective forms. This socio-political element is so much a part of all these kinds of endeavour that it affects not only subject matter, but also how that subject matter is addressed. It affects how the group/collaborative is put together, how the group functions, and the group's dealings with one another and their audience. For our purposes I shall broadly refer to the forms generally as "Alternative Theatre" (See Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1984).

This pervasive feeling of rebellion against, what was deemed by practitioners to be, an unacceptable situation, is a sentiment that had filtered down from many of the avant-garde practitioners dealt with in previous chapters. The creators of all the forms mentioned above notably rebelled against not only the socio-political situation of their countries, but also the theatrical conventions of the times, a sentiment that was echoed in the socio-political messages of the theatre the practitioners discussed here came to create.

#### **Marxism:**

Many forms of *Alternative Theatre* are created for the people (and often by the people), which is why they have also been described as *People's Theatre*<sup>20</sup>. At the core of much of the proletariat theatre in the past has been a Marxist approach, which undoubtedly led to the feasible assertion that theatre could be used as a cultural and political weapon. Most theorists agree that, specifically in the South African situation, theatre should be a "functional discourse in society" (Steadman, 1992: 33), where the artists themselves function as "communal culture...historians" who make theatrical creations that can act as a "...barometer with which to measure the intellectual and emotional – even political – climate in that country" (Hauptfleisch, 1997: 2). These statements by Temple

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<sup>20</sup> By Robert Mshengu Kavanagh, who will be discussed a little later.



Hauptfleisch bring to the fore the symbiotic relationship that exists between the theatre and the community it serves. One uses the term 'serves' in this instance because this responsibility to the community in which the collectives/ensembles operated, became an all-encompassing attitude for all those involved. It is also a fundamental assertion of many practitioners, writing about the socio-political effectiveness of these theatrical forms, that it is:

...the theatrical system and the sum of artefacts in any given period and given context which may be said to 'reflect' that context, and which, in the longer term, may be able to 'influence' or 'change' that specific context.

-Hauptfleisch, 1997: 3

#### Hegemonic cultural control:

All through history, theatre and performance have been used by a particular controlling group in a society as socio-political 'training' aids; aids to influence the "cognitive strategies" of a social majority (Fleischman, 1990: 94). Mark Fleischman traces this tendency right back to Aristotle, showing how this coercive system has been used to "bridle" the individual and to bring about a pseudo-balance in society (Boal in Fleischman, 1990: 94). This tendency runs right through from the tragedies of ancient Greece, to the catholic morality or mystery plays in the Middle Ages, to the monarch commissioned performances in the Renaissance period. Fleischman also highlights, however, that in each of these periods there was a non-formal trend, which was aimed at the common man and sought to undermine the indoctrination attempts of those in power. In Greek times it was the *dithyrambs* - performed in honour of Dionysus, in the Middle Ages, festivals and carnivals provided opportunities for spectacles "whose basic aesthetic function was transformation; turning the word and its rigid structure upside down" and finally, during the Renaissance, forms like Commedia dell'arte provided the non-literate masses with an informal alternative (Fleischman, 1990: 95).

The important factor here was that attempts were being made to undermine the coercive and dominating force of those who wished to keep the proletariat ignorant and, as a result

(by their reasoning) docile. Those who began to make people's theatre in South Africa, like the practitioners of theatre-for-development (TFD), workers' theatre and workshop theatre were, in effect, trying to precipitate the same subversion and (hopefully) subjugation of the oppressive powers.

So the context within which these practitioners were operating was exceptionally significant when it came to the subject matter and reinvention of techniques and form, undertaken as a part of their rebellion. In the South African context, the important catalyst for this rebellion was the unnatural literary and separatist hegemony that dominated theatre in South Africa, up until and including the time when workshop theatre practices began to mature in the 1970s and 1980s. As a throw back from the historical practices discussed above the powers-that-be in South Africa put into place a system of values that elevated literary achievements above, all other systems of cultural expression "and then deni[ed] the majority of the population the technology to participate in literary activities" (Fleischman, 1990: 90). It was a form of oppressive exclusion; only those who were literate could have access to the dominant form of cultural expression, and cultural expression and theatre practice were dominated by North American, and/or European, traditions and definitions of what a theatrical piece should be, how it should be structured and how one should address political issues.

#### Experimental Theatre in South Africa:

Hauptfleisch identifies two forms of experimental theatre that were set up in opposition to the elitist theatre: *Indigenous 'alternative' theatre* and *Indigenous 'hybrid' theatre*. These two forms evolved as an attempt to challenge and possibly undermine the grip that the repressive Apartheid regime had over the political paradigm (Hauptfleisch, 1997: 58).

#### *Indigenous 'alternative' theatre:*

Those involved in creating *indigenous 'alternative' theatre* all took up an anti-establishment position, even though the forms they used to express this position were



diverse<sup>21</sup>. As subcategories to this group, there were those who imported political theatre forms and duplicated experiments from other countries, modifying them slightly to go against accepted formulas, and then there were those who used not forms but techniques developed elsewhere “in order to confront the realities of South Africa” (Hauptfleisch, 1997: 59).

These projects included those involved in political theatre, community theatre and street theatre and who were influenced by “agitprop” (or political) practitioners like Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire. These practitioners helped the South African opposition to get a better idea of Freire’s “culture of silence” and how to counteract this using *popular theatre*<sup>22</sup>.

Ian Steadman defines the concept of popular theatre, in his essay *The Uses of Theatre* (1992), stipulating that popular theatre is the non-formal vessel for normative discursive interaction, which is allowed to take place amongst the majority of people in a societal sector. This form of theatre, therefore, came to perform a vital function in the struggle for political liberation “...because the spontaneity and the celebration of creativity, the expression of political aspirations before politically oppressed audiences and the ceremonial rejection of political oppression” were all means of awakening oppressed people from the culture of silence induced in them by their political conditions (Steadman, 1992: 42).

Under these conditions, and working with popular theatre intentions, were South African practitioners like Athol Fugard, Barney Simon, Malcolm Purkey (and his Junction Avenue Theatre Company) and Robert Mshengu Kavanagh (with Workshop ’71). All of these practitioners and their associates are what Steadman calls “sympathetic sectors of the non-oppressed communities, [who] although their work was largely institutionalised and relatively unravaged by censorship and control, also resorted to political themes and methods in their cultural expression” (Steadman, 1992: 43).

<sup>21</sup> A position that they shared with many of the avant-garde practitioners discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>22</sup> Discussed by Paulo Freire in his work *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach* (1998).

Importantly, these individuals were among the first in South Africa to recognise the need for a political theatre aimed at mobilising the masses. The forerunners in this particular arm of workshop theatre were Workshop '71 under the leadership of Robert Kavanagh.

*Robert Kavanagh and People's Theatre:*

Although much of Robert Kavanagh's work and techniques described in his 1997 handbook, fall under what came to be called workshop theatre, at the time when he was formulating his theories he used the term *people's theatre* instead. So, chronologically he fits here in our discussion, but theoretically he would probably also be classified as a workshop theatre practitioner<sup>23</sup>.

In calling his theatre 'people's theatre' the implication was that most people could participate in the theatre's inception. All it required was a commonality, that was the human condition: "Theatre grows out of four basic human activities: labour, play, ritual and narrative" (Kavanagh, 1997: 1). Kavanagh also believes that this basic commonality calls for an 'equality' among participants and a corollary of this equality is democracy; "democracy ensures freedom, collective and individual creativity and a rich variety of inputs" (Kavanagh, 1997: 5).

Kavanagh believes that creativity and freedom-of-input are directly linked, and that the collective situation is the ideal vessel for allowing group freedom and stimulating individual imaginative contribution towards making a successful product (Kavanagh, 1997: 5). But the group needs to also be working towards a collective goal with no star focus, and the members of a group need to be doing theatre for the same reasons. This is why Kavanagh requires two kinds of commitment from his theatre group: commitment to the art of theatre and commitment to what that art is saying to the society for which it is performing. If there is dissention concerning motivation, the group will not be able to make decisions that are in the best interests for the group as a whole. For example, if

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<sup>23</sup> That is as it is grouped under Indigenous 'hybrid' or Crossover theatre by Hauptfleisch.



financial gain or public acclaim is the motivation of those getting involved in the democratic process, which is workshop theatre, they are going to fail in their attempts to make a success of it. Because these kinds of motivation are based in the realm of ego and if someone is concerned primarily with their ego, and protection or gratification thereof, they will not be able to improvise in the first place – as pointed out by many of the practitioners in Chapter One of this study. But Kavanagh is also careful to point out that those involved should not, at any stage, be placed under false impressions of grandeur but rather that should be kept in-the-loop about the financial situation by their director, so that no one builds any kind of false impression or hope with regard to the financial position of the group.

But if the group are of *one mind* then Kavanagh believes that there can be success. He comments on the myth that a democratic situation is conducive to anarchy. Kavanagh believes that there needs to be order and discipline for a democracy to function efficiently in the first place, but he does specify that that “...democratic order and democratic discipline is what we impose on ourselves - not what someone else imposes on us” (Kavanagh, 1997: 6). He also emphasises that punctuality is the most paramount of disciplines; it robs that group of precious time and also undermines solidarity, as some are asked to wait and patience wears thin.

This stems from Kavanagh’s ideas of respect and how it should be cultivated within the group unit. They need to have respect: for the director, and the director must respect his fellow artists, and the artists must have respect for themselves and each other. He believes that discipline will be naturally cultivated in a situation where respect is present. He also believes that there needs to be self-regulation, especially in the area alcohol intake, but this request for moderation should never come as a personal attack but rather, Kavanagh suggests, that it be the job of the more experienced members of a group to lead the group by example, in an effort to enlighten other participants as to the detrimental effects of excessive drinking (and to impress upon them the need for diplomacy, instead of the personal attacks or mockery, in dealing with such situations).

This element of respect leads on to processes of active listening and participation, whereby all those involved are given equal opportunities to voice ideas. Even if ideas do not seem all that valuable to begin with, Kavanagh believes that all contributions should be given equal attention, so that no one feels that their contribution is useless or unwanted, a feeling which will inhibit future contribution on their behalf. The participant can begin to fear ridicule and this is crippling for the creativity of an actor: he begins to “play safe, [and this]...is the end of creativity and originality” (Kavanagh, 1997: 7).

One thing that does become evident, however, is that although Kavanagh believes that any and all ideas are important, he does not believe that everyone is inherently capable of the strenuous process which is his actor-training programme. Kavanagh needs his group to be working on a full-time basis together, and to have confidence in each other and the group as a whole before they embark on the journey through: *relaxation, concentration, sincerity, observation, imagination, ensemble and improvisation skills*.

Firstly in connection with *relaxation*, Kavanagh says that “stiffness is the attribute of a corpse – and thus of dead theatre, where directors actually prefer the actors to be tense and nervous, the better to dominate them” (Kavanagh, 1997: 9). But in people’s theatre this stiffness, which manifests itself in an individual’s body, creates an invasive strained atmosphere within the group, which can stifle group creativity. Kavanagh makes recommendations for dissolving tensions: icebreaker exercises (like children’s games), comfortable clothing and reconfiguring ideas of what ‘good acting entails’. All of these endeavours, he believes, will aid in making the actor more relaxed.

*Concentration* is an aid to relaxation in Kavanagh’s opinion, because when an actor is concentrating on the task at hand he loses sight of his nervousness and self-consciousness. Concentration is Kavanagh’s basic requirement for acting and is also crucial for improvisation, character-building, internalisation, emotional recall, ensemble work, the development of stage atmosphere and the evocation of sincerity.



Kavanagh sees *sincerity* as a kind of test that the group needs to apply to their work that will identify “phoniness” and stiffness in one’s acting, which can be caused by egocentricity and which ultimately distorts the validity of the experience the group is trying to communicate. Kavanagh believes that sincerity is most important for the development of improvisation skills, because when one first tries to tackle an improvisational exercise and when individuals “are called upon to do something and [they] are not sure how well [they] will do it, [they] pretend confidence. This shows in talking too much, exaggerating gestures and movement, not listening or responding to our fellow actors and in the wild egotism and unreality of our behaviour in certain situations” (Kavanagh, 1997: 10). Ultimately nervousness can lead to lack of sincerity and therefore “phoniness”.

But if the actor is engaged in the exercise properly, making use of concentration and *observation*, he can take note of “mannerisms, behaviour, facial expression, gesture, speech pattern, intonation, gait...etc.” by looking at, listening to, taking note of, and recalling all that he encounters. The actor can then use this material to inform a composite characterisation (Kavanagh, 1997: 11).

*Imagination* works hand-in-hand with concentration in the creative process and is a faculty needed by all involved in a production: actors, directors, and stage and lighting designers, in order to bring their specific portfolios to life. Imagination takes the creative raw material gathered during observation and “transforms observation into inspiration, reality into art. It is the heart of creativity” (Kavanagh, 1997: 11).

Kavanagh believes that the word *ensemble* is just a “slightly fancy word for togetherness or cohesion”. This togetherness implies that members of an ensemble need to be sensitive to the other actors with whom they are acting, because when ‘star focus’ begins to make its unpleasant presence felt and individuals can be seen acting as “if they were alone on stage this destroys a production” (Kavanagh, 1997: 12). Kavanagh goes on to equate group acting with playing a game of soccer, in that if one is aware of what is happening and where each person’s talents lie the team can work efficiently. He asserts



that “any amount of individual brilliance, if it is not co-ordinated and not sensitive to the play of the other ten members, will not win the match” (Kavanagh, 1997: 12).

Finally, *improvisation* is Kavanagh’s central skill in the practice of people’s theatre and is used in exercises to develop all of the above-mentioned characteristics. He believes that improvisation has useful applications throughout the production process. From pre-production, where it can be used to train actors before they start to address a text, especially in the case of Shakespeare and such like, where it can aid the actors in comprehending the text. The problem for some of the actors who struggle to interpret the text is naturally solved by improvisation because the actors are able to explore situations and possible characters within the text before they are bogged-down by addressing the verbosity of the structured text. The exercises also function to stimulate further improvisations that investigate possible basic themes, atmospheres, confrontations and conflicts, which the actors can internalise as possibilities for character and situation, before they come to using the text to inform the characters and situation further. “Then when they take up the actual dialogue it expresses what they already feel. Instead of being a cage, the dialogue becomes wings. It enables them to express what they are already feeling better than they could themselves...” (Kavanagh, 1997: 35). As an offshoot of this, and through these improvisation exercises, the play can begin to “suggest its own casting”, ultimately providing the director with an “organic” cast (Kavanagh, 1997: 34).

But Kavanagh, like Grotowski, Brook and others, is also careful to stipulate how improvisation can be abused or misunderstood to be merely doing-your-own-thing and showing off. Instead, improvisation (like every other skill in theatre) needs to be developed. Kavanagh recommends a process of slow accumulation: beginning with one actor working alone, who then relates to another and later two or more actors. He believes that this method of slowly adding actors to the ‘mix’ helps to cultivate concentration, in that, with practice each additional member is merely enveloped into the concentration circle. Only by this step-by-step inclusion of members, can a group improvisation have the right level of concentration, sincerity and sensitivity.



It is at this point that improvisation can be used for other purposes during the production process. Kavanagh proposes a method which has been utilised by most workshop practitioners in subsequent years: improvisation as a major method of playmaking, “that is in the development of a group’s own original play [and even, as can be seen] in many forms of people’s theatre[,] scenes or sections of a performance may be completely unscripted and the actors create the drama among themselves or by interacting with the audience” (Kavanagh, 1997: 11). This kind of improvisation is very empowering for the group and allows for what Kavanagh calls “Group Directing” (Kavanagh, 1997: 28). *Group directing* allows for a situation something like Zakes Mda’s comgen theatre<sup>24</sup>, where the group directs themselves and although sometimes these impromptu performance that develop can be infused with an exquisitely unpredictable energy (which not only makes the audience feel included, but which can bring a performance to electric ‘life’), Kavanagh believes that this process is flawed because they now lack the outside/pseudo audience eye<sup>25</sup>. The actors find it difficult to step outside of the action on stage and be objective, in addition to this it is almost impossible for them to see the bigger picture – even if they can look at the scenes they are not in, they do not have ‘access’ to the overall image, which is not conducive to a coherent vision.

So although this process was improvised, Kavanagh came to foster a school of thought that advocates the inclusion of a director in the improvised text-creation process rather than leaving it over to be purely group-motivated production. He is, however, very careful to lay out many guidelines for the delicate handling of the role of facilitator, so that the “director” does not become an “autocratic director” (Kavanagh, 1997: 28). If a facilitator is to utilise *democratic/socialist directing* Kavanagh requires him to take on the role of the external eye without having exclusive control over the vision, policy or strategy of the production<sup>26</sup>. Before commencing a production the director is to approach

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<sup>24</sup> Comgen is an acronym for Community Generated theatre, described by Zakes Mda in *When People Play People: Development Communication Through Theatre* (1993).

<sup>25</sup> Kavanagh also insinuates that this situation is more conducive to the anarchy that improvisation can become.

<sup>26</sup> A strategy begun by those involved at the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow, the birthplace of avant-garde theatre.



the theatre company with his preliminary vision for the production, then he is to discuss this with the actors and when agreement has been reached on the directorial approach and the research has been done collectively, rehearsals can begin. “During the rehearsal process discussions were held and the actors contributed their ideas and commented on the process. The director [then] proceeded on the basis of the agreements reached at these discussions. Thus the director supervised a process that had been democratically decided on by the company and proceeded on the basis of consultation and discussion” (Kavanagh, 1997: 30). The discussion can even be extended to include all aspects of production and stage design. But this process leaves no room for egotism, there is a basic minimum for doing theatre in this way and it is that the group needs to agree with each other about what they are “trying to do and be prepared to criticise and accept comradely criticism frankly and without bitterness and personal antagonism” (Kavanagh, 1997: 30).

An important part of Kavanagh’s directing process is what he terms “Workshop performance” (Kavanagh, 1997: 42). This is a very audience-orientated vision for a production, and entails a performance being done towards the end of the rehearsal schedule, which functions as a kind of test-run for the piece. The piece is done for an audience, invited by the cast, who have a “special knowledge of the subject matter of the play, artists and a cross section of the intended audience” (Kavanagh, 1997: 42). This showing is intended to be a kind of forum theatre which gives those watching a chance to give useful criticisms, suggestions and perspectives<sup>27</sup>.

The *workshop performance* is also exceptionally useful in connection with a text written by the group itself, because not only does it “help [the ensemble] to measure [their] progress and the extent to which [they] are communicating what [they] want to, but often much of the play’s dialogue, plot characterisation, imagery and so on can be influenced by people who do not have the time to work with [the ensemble] day after day” but have

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<sup>27</sup> Reminiscent of Augusto Boal’s methods expounded on in *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* (1995) During forum theatre each actor (or spect-actor-cum-audience-member) is allowed to interrupt the action, discuss what they have seen and even try out an alternative idea. In this way many facets of a situation can be scrutinised as a means of problem solving and further solutions to a problem can be discussed during the detailed analysis after the performance. (Boal, 1995: 63)



much to contribute (Kavanagh, 1997: 42). It allows the piece to become an even more proletariat-orientated theatre piece; one aimed at and focussed on the people and cultivated with the very specific aim of communication.

*The Junction Avenue Theatre Company:*

The Junction Avenue Theatre Company took a different road in accessing its proletarian audience. The group decided to root their presentations in past events this functioned to conceptualise the present struggles by popularising the history of the struggle. Essentially their tool to mobilise their audience became their “use of the past to understand the present” (Orkin, 2001: 8). The group used “... the past, not only...their own histories but...[also] that of the social order of which they [were] a part” and used various kinds of writing and texts as a source of inspiration (Orkin, 2001: 2). Their “research” and use of already written texts was fuelled by an “implicit interest in the relationship between writing, experience and dramatisation [which] was to become a central figure of all the Company’s plays” (Orkin, 2001: 2). A further corollary of this analysis of history was what was implied by the possibilities shown and changes brought about on stage. By showing both past and present, the events take on new meaning, “...and implicitly, change is possible, not only on the stage but in the social order from which the play comes” (Orkin, 2001: 10).

One other notable point made by Myles Holloway in his essay: *Creative Co-operation: A Critical survey of Workshop Theatre in South Africa*, is the recognisably Marxist slant that the Junction Avenue Theatre Company, in particular, takes, by placing the elements of parody, burlesque, historical pageant and distancing polemical review within the framework of a “progressive Marxist understanding of colonial and capitalist domination” (Holloway, 1993: 21). This fusion of elements in political statement-making is a throw back to the avant-garde theatre practitioners of the previous chapter. Under the influence of such avant-garde theorists, the practitioners of Junction Avenue Theatre Company approached the material with a level of “analytical and intellectual detachment”, which ultimately ended up taking “precedence over the shaping processes

of art” (Holloway, 1993: 21). One wonders if putting the political message ahead of a fully rounded artistic presentation may have worked to the detriment of a group trying to access the ‘common man’.

The Junction Avenue Theatre Company, however, did not seem to utilise the process of improvisation for text creation, which is arguably one of the most fundamental and beneficial techniques to have evolved from the collaborative efforts of those involved in these improvisational processes. It took members of the Junction Avenue Theatre Company like Ari Sitas and Astrid von Kotze to take (possibly) the most important theatrical step, in the use of improvisation - that of empowering participants to tell their idiosyncratic stories<sup>28</sup>. This was a massive step towards mobilising their audience, and ultimately even the surrounding community. This form found its definition in the second of Hauptfleisch’s experimental theatres categories: *Indigenous ‘hybrid’ theatre or Crossover Theatre*.

#### Workers’ Theatre and Workshop Theatre:

##### *Indigenous ‘hybrid’ theatre or Crossover Theatre:*

This form of theatrical endeavour is also not categorically or clearly defined as a theatrical form but is rather a “specific, yet eclectic, attitude towards playmaking” (Hauptfleisch, 1997: 60). All the practitioners in *indigenous ‘hybrid’ theatre* were united with those who came before them, and with each other, in their efforts to align themselves *against* the dominant tendencies in South African culture.

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<sup>28</sup> Although Barney Simon had used the techniques prior to this group in *Cincinatti* (1979), they were the first to use lay-people in the creation of the text (as opposed to professional actors).



Recognising that the dominant forms of theatre were the products of the dominant White group in society, the practitioners of alternative theatre created consciously oppositional forms: plays which attempted to demystify aspects of South African life through the creation of new forms and techniques. No longer where Europeans and American models imitated.

- Hauptfleisch & Steadman, 1983: 167

The move towards a more indigenous South African theatre, that drew on many and varied forms of *traditional South African* cultural input, was sparked by a change in attitude of the theatre practitioners of the time. Those artists involved in theatre creation in South Africa had been functioning under misguided and traditionally Western attitudes about the nature and function of drama. Until this particular turning point traditional western thinking had led South African practitioners to believe that westernised theatre was more advanced than indigenous forms, “which were held to be inferior in terms of that tradition” (Hauptfleisch & Steadman, 1983: 167). This change in attitude marked the launch of the hunt for an indigenous theatre form.

Most of the practitioners writing about the elements of workshop theatre and their derivations, have their own explanation of the origins of these elements and the reasons why each element has been included in this particular structure. The long list of elements: narrative, mimetic, minimalistic, episodic, musical and comical (at times), is traced back (by various sources) to cultural structures like the oral traditions, Christianity, judicial systems and even further back in history to more primitive rites and ceremonies. The combination of all of these factors gives the performances a ‘melting pot’ feel, a feeling which is far more faithfully indicative of the South African cultural situation it is attempting to embody.

The minimalism or frugality of these workshop theatre productions, is suggested by some, to have stemmed from the techniques of Jerzy Grotowski’s Poor Theatre and Peter

Brook's theories in *The Empty Space*<sup>29</sup>. But one wonders if, Brook and Grotowski's work (even though it was experimental in nature) had such a huge influence over the practitioners of South Africa at the time, because why would they, in trying to break away from European theatre convention return to those same conventions for inspiration? Although practitioners like Malcolm Purkey, Barney Simon and Athol Fugard acknowledge their influence (and Bertolt Brecht's) and would have been aware of the conventions of these two European practitioners, the people working with them, and on projects like the workers' theatre, may not have been aware<sup>30</sup>. It seems more feasible that the minimalism of workshop theatre productions evolved instead out of necessity: meagre means or finances and the need to move easily between venues.

#### *The Dunlop Play (1983):*

This would certainly seem to have been the case with productions like *The Dunlop play* which is considered by many to be exemplary of a successful workers' theatre production. Workers' theatre, as a form, was one of the types of *crossover theatre* which most successfully embraced the element of minimalism, mentioned above and for very practical reasons. Because these kinds of projects were initiated as a means of igniting interest in political issues, particularly in the realm of trade union disagreements, the funds and resources available to the producers and participants involved in these projects would have been 'meagre'<sup>31</sup>. So to minimise costs the group used posters to tell the audience where the scene is 'set', pamphlets to indicate what they were campaigning for and in using their overalls and "takkies" there was no need to expend finances in elaborate costumes (von Kotze, 1988: 11-12). Added to this the performers did not need a variety of costumes but rather moved smoothly between characters and languages as

<sup>29</sup> As suggested by Myles Holloway, 1993: 23, Jeanne Colleran, 1995: 44 and Albert Wertheim, 2000: 79 (with Wertheim's specific reference to Athol Fugard's techniques), among others.

<sup>30</sup> With the possible exceptions of Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema (who Holloway says "were at pains to acknowledge the influence of Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre*...on their own work." 1993: 23) and Winston Ntshona and John Kani (who Fugard took the time to familiarise with his concepts of 'poor' theatre – *Notebooks* (1983: 201))

<sup>31</sup> *The Dunlop play* was initiated by Geoff Schreiner (in conjunction with Ari Sitas) when the Dunlop Company tried to form an internal union that would undermine MAWU (Metal and Allied Workers Union). If they were successful in recruiting the workers' it would undoubtedly have meant a breach of the workers' rights (Von Kotze, 1988: 21).



they represented the stereotypically defined, and therefore accessible, characters. Productions of this kind would only make use of symbolic costume when necessary, the “pin-pong ball nose” is one of the few examples and became the earmark of the comical white ‘boss’ figures in workers’ *and* workshop theatre (von Kotze, 1988: 12).

The characters were kept minimalistic and easily identifiable because the aim of this theatre was not as much to entertain, as it was to reclaim the workers’ culture and identity. To do this they needed to “take culture out of the hands of the establishment and to create new forms that [were]...meaningful to the democratic forces who [were]...working for change” (von Kotze, 1988: 8) and because of the cultural focus of workers’ theatre, von Kotze believes that each production can serve one of two functions: mobilisation and education (von Kotze 1988: 102)<sup>32</sup>.

*The Dunlop Play* is an example of the *mobilisation* capacity of workers’ theatre and sought to “enlist support for the workers’ campaigns and strategies such as boycotts. They tr[ie]d to raise money for the strike fund or request financial and material assistance for the strikers and their families” (Von Kotze, 1988: 102). In spite of the pragmatics behind its formulation the play also conveyed a much more constructive message to its audience and had exceptionally positive effects on the participants. To begin with the production required the “shop stewards”, who were democratically elected (by the employees) leaders within the Dunlop factory, to be accountable for the individuals who had been trusted into their stewardship (von Kotze, 1988: 21). These stewards chose to lead by example and prove to those under their care “that there is nothing separate about what [they were] talking and what [they were] doing” (von Kotze, 1988: 21). They were quoted as saying: “cultural work is part of the general struggle and if we can do it, they can do it too” (von Kotze, 1988: 21). The players were “directly accountable to their fellow-workers” and as a result they strove to faithfully include all the elements that were perceived to be necessary by fellow workers (von Kotze, 1988: 103).

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<sup>32</sup> The latter does not fall within the field of this study, but such endeavours included upliftment and health education for workers and their families.



The responsibility placed on the participants, by their fellow workers, to work for cultural transformation did not only “...effect the stories of plays. It also ha[d] to do with the collective creativity in workshop productions” (von Kotze, 1988: 8). This meant that to create a composite picture of their circumstances the participants had to include “actual experience, rather than imaginative exploration” (Holloway, 1993: 25). The process of creating the workers’ theatre piece reflected the participant’s desire to seek the truth. One of the first improvisations was used to re-confirm the group’s common point of departure, their workplace. This improvisation allowed the participants to first familiarise themselves with each persons respective position in the factory and then asked them to create a ‘tableau’ with each of their particular routines forming part of a production line. This exercise got the participants physically involved while solidifying their personal ‘identity’ within the group (von Kotze, 1988: 23).

The presentation itself was to be divided up into similar ‘tableaux’ and collaged scenes and each scene, while being constructed from the elements of the participant’s own histories, was to become part of a more allegorical presentation of a man who was “clearly representative of all the workers”. The final product showed the man’s employment history at Dunlop over a period of 25 years, from the day of his appointment to the day of his ‘long service’ party (von Kotze, 1988: 29).

In order to formulate each individual scene the group employed a four-step procedure. The process ran from “fact finding and discussion of sequence of events” (taking a certain event and breaking down what happened, how it happened and who was involved) through “improvisation of characters” (the discussion of characters in the form of a ‘show-and-tell’<sup>33</sup> thereafter the group separated into ‘workers’ and ‘managers’ to find a “stereotyped image” of their respective roles) and finally to the “Improvisation of scene” (when the two character groups came back together to interact) (von Kotze, 1988: 24-25). The final interaction was usually repeated a couple of times before the group “discussion of improvisation” during which the group picked the best elements of the improvisation

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<sup>33</sup> The decision as to who could and would play the part best was also done at this stage; a democratic decision was taken based on the participant who elicited the most laughter.



(von Kotze, 1988: 25). This is where the “coordinators” of the workers’ theatre process made the bulk of their input; during the discussion and formulation stages of the production process (von Kotze, 1988: 29).

Ari Sitas and Astrid von Kotze were the *coordinators* of *The Dunlop Play*, among other productions, and deliberately used the term coordinator to delineate what one could describe as a low-key facilitator. They did not work on the projects in a generative or creative capacity but rather performed more of an administrative role. They were required to organise when and where rehearsals would be, they had the task of recording, transcribing and writing out sessions (to help facilitate each successive improvisation) and they also helped in facilitating the final structuring of the piece itself (von Kotze, 1988: 23& 29-30). Even the structure of the scenes seemed to develop independent of the coordinators’ input because they were based on “...the experience of ordinary men and women” and developed out of the ideas simply put in everyday language, which would later become the dialogue (von Kotze, 1988: 14).

Because the scenes were based on their own lives the participant’s were careful not to allow subjectivity to overshadow their pursuit of the *truth* in a given situation. On the suggestion of the coordinators the participants also improvised scenarios in which an argument could take place between someone with union loyalties and someone without. The coordinators provided the group with a possible framework (in this case a domestic situation) and then asked the participants to each assume a character and feasible argument. The resultant dramatic tension and conflict between the characters provided the group with a clearer picture of possible standpoints that individuals in opposition to their message might take. It also gave the participants an opportunity to ‘trouble-shoot’ answers and ultimately strengthen their argument (von Kotze, 1988: 26).

Not only did the participants investigate their peer’s fears, in attempts to find a means of dispelling them, but they also investigated the history of their company and employers. This was done so as to better understand “the true nature of this hard-headed employer” because it is only in light of past events that one can understand all that motivates an



individual (von Kotze, 1988: 28). This process functioned to “bring to light attitudes which were questionable as prejudiced and sometimes unreflected” and worked to strengthen rather than undermine the participants argument (von Kotze, 1988: 39).

Ultimately the play functioned on many levels to inform and unify. Firstly, for those involved, it brought them together “as workers and as men” (von Kotze, 1988: 37). The participants were given a chance to share personally and through others’ sharing were able to learn about different parts of the factory and the conditions their comrades were working under (von Kotze, 198: 38). The result being that they were drawn together to form a situation of “solidarity beyond that of being members of the union” (Von Kotze, 1988: 37). The participants realised that through cultural activities the “alienation [and isolation] forced upon them by the nature of their work in the highly industrialised economy of South Africa” could be overcome to a certain extent (Fleischman, 1990: 111). Secondly, “...each participant emerged from the play with a renewed sense of self-worth and self-confidence”; the plays invoked a sense of pride in their story, a story which was now important enough to be told, and growing self-confidence in their abilities, which helped with worker-management negotiations (von Kotze, 1988: 38). Thirdly, the performers were able to explore, and subsequently understand, their past and exploitation, both within the context of their working environment and within the wider context of South African labour history (von Kotze, 1988: 39). The fourth positive outcome was that the performances provided an opportunity for those involved to play out suppressed desires, ideas and behaviours in almost cathartic fashion, a move that would hopefully have dissolved some of their pent up tensions (von Kotze, 1988: 37).

But von Kotze believes that the most important function the play performed was to herald the beginning for a “unified cultural movement of workers in and around Durban” (and one would suggest the rest of South Africa) (von Kotze, 1988: 40).

The play was different, it was propaganda. And it was an experience which left strong visual and verbal sensations, alongside the usual rhetoric of mass-meetings.

- Sitas in von Kotze, 1988: 40



Those ‘strong visual and verbal sensations’ were the reason why this particular play, and other workers’ theatre presentations like it, was so influential on its audiences. The emotive music which was included in the presentations was not only an integral part of the performance process, improvised and created by the participants, but it also appealed to the audience collectively; becoming “an extension of the action...[and] sum[ming] up the main thoughts of a scene” (von Kotze, 1988: 12). The humour was another important means of accessing the audience, as they were able to laugh at the expense of self-indulgent authority figures that were shown to be “puppets in the hands of greater capitalist powers”, and easily undermined by the cunning workers (von Kotze, 1988: 13). Laughter also provided the audience with a means of rising above the “mishaps” of their everyday situation as they are drawn *into* the joke instead of the joke being made at their expense (von Kotze, 1988: 13).

For those witnessing the production it became an opportunity to enter into Boal-type forum theatre discussions, as the participants address them directly and “repl[ied] spontaneously to any comments coming from the floor” (von Kotze, 1988: 11-12). The play’s target audience are reached effectively because they are initially pleased “that their struggle has been given an importance by being made into a play” and are simultaneously encouraged to forge ahead and “make connections between their individual experiences and the collective struggle” (von Kotze, 1988: 12). The audience receives the hopeful and positive message that although the ‘heroes’ of the story are exploited and abused “they are never shown as defeated or crushed” a message which will hopefully spur them to action despite the set backs (von Kotze, 1988: 13).

All these elements placed the workers’ plays on “the sharp edges of a politics-culture interface, which while oppressive and destructive can also provide ‘creative conjunctures’ which drive theatre on to play new roles within the struggle against apartheid” (Geady, 1990: 363). Even when the productions eventually became more *commercial* and less *functional* because the issues had been addressed and the conflicts

resolved; the performances still functioned to conscientise many of the young white people in culturally exclusive apartheid South Africa.

Essentially workers' theatre was the ultimate in community-based theatre<sup>34</sup>, during which they practiced what has been termed "grass roots democracy"; which facilitated "significant cultural innovations and transformations" by creating an opportunity for a "reciprocal relationship between culture and politics" to be formed (Geady, 1990: 363). This democratic theatre took the politically educating capacity of alternative forerunners and moved to mobilise those involved by allowing for a broad "range of ...inspirations and influences" to be amalgamated into one (Geady, 1990: 363). At the heart of such work was the actual experience: a raw realism, uncluttered by metaphor "picture[s] of something else" and abstract realities (von Kotze, 1988: 13) where the pursuit of truth often overshadowed the imaginative exploration of the artistic components of performance (von Kotze, 1988: 13). This is an element which may have been slightly to the performance's disadvantage because although some of the productions were extremely successful aesthetically, others were purely functional. This factor put performances of this kind on the opposite end of the spectrum to Junction Avenue Theatre Company, in that the audience may not always have been able to associate with the simplicity of the delivery.

#### *Further Elements of Crossover Theatre:*

This is why it may be beneficial to investigate the aesthetic advances that were made by those involved in workshop theatre projects of around the same time, because as a theatrical endeavour it seemed to have the equivalent political effect as those who had come before, but in the case of workshop theatre, the final artistic or aesthetic product turned out to be far more engaging.

One of the most striking traditional influences was that of the oral or storytelling ritual of many of the indigenous African tribes. This element seemed to fit perfectly into not only the avant-garde vision for theatre, but also into the anti-western theatrical endeavours of

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<sup>34</sup> Bordering on what Zakes Mda may have termed "Comgen" theatre, see page 75 for definition.



the South African practitioners. One tends to agree with Richard Schechner's argument that oral tradition is "political in the widest sense" (Schechner, 1969: 238), because the storyteller of oral tradition is the individual who represents *history* and tells it to his people. The narrative structure that workshop theatre came to assume was argued, by members of the Junction Avenue Theatre Company, to be a vessel for Marxist or socialist discourse because "every story, in turn, assumes or communicates a particular understanding of belief about the construction of the world" (Orkin, 2001: 11). This cultural or political transfer, that is dependent on the spoken word, evolved out of what Walter Ong terms a "verbomotor lifestyle". The *verbomotor lifestyle* meant that human interaction "depended significantly more on effective use of words...and significantly less of non-verbal [communication]" responding to visual input as a means of interpreting the 'objective' world around them (Ong in Fleischman, 1990: 92).

This oral tradition method of recording history was also dependent on what Ong calls "mnemonic patterns": patterns designed for the aid of memory, which gave the oral presentations their rhythmic and often repetitious style and allowed for the development of communal formulas to help the society to associate with what was being said. The workshop theatre practitioners harnessed this form, which made history and even present events more accessible, as an essential narrative tool, allowing them to give the pieces a true-individual-story feel, while still making the political content memorable.

To aid in the utilisation of what could have become a 'stiff' and almost sermon-type address Fleischman believes that workshop theatre practitioners took their cue from the sometimes slightly over the top, yet apparently effective acting style of the 'township musicals' of Gibson Kente. This style of presentation was very broad and physical, requiring both physical and vocal acrobatics from those involved in a production – an element which worked very effectively to highlight that sometimes "ironic comical vision" which was a characteristic earmark of the Kente style and became indicative of the workshop presentation as well (Fleischman, 1990: 98). This comic style, coupled with caricatures of the important figures of the time and the use of pathos to drive home a



point, made the plays emotively moving, making use of libinal<sup>35</sup> rather than didactic forces – which the avant-garde agitprop plays have often been charged with utilising.

These township plays are also believed to have been one of the birthplaces for the episodic nature of the workshop plays. Anne Fuchs and Mark Fleischman also make the feasible point that the episodic structure could also have sprung from the already mentioned oral tradition of the original folk-tales<sup>36</sup>. Fleischman opposes the argument that acknowledges Brecht as an influence on the episodic nature of the texts, because why would those creating workshop theatre choose to utilise a form so deeply rooted in the literary traditions that workshop theatre was rallying against? Rather, Fleischman believes that the episodic structure of workshop theatre was an “integrated element of the verbomotor cultural expression” (Fleischman, 1990: 104). So, the episodic nature of the productions was not only a natural way of dealing with the material, but also facilitated swift and slick movement, both chronologically and geographically. This allowed the workshop plays to give a more polished rendition of a wide range of social practices and viewpoints – making the play more succinct and therefore accessible to its audience.

The reason why these productions were able to access and bring to life all these, seemingly unrelated, theatrical elements was because the casts themselves were seemingly unrelated. In most cases a collaborative/ensemble was not only multi-cultural, but also multi-lingual and multi-talented, which allowed for a huge variety of skills and creative raw material to be put at their disposal. Those involved in the production came to resemble Alexander Tairov’s<sup>37</sup> ‘master-actor’: as “multi-talented dancer-singer-performers, rather than actors or actresses alone” (Hauptfleisch, 1997: 69). The central issue in the plays and performances, however, is to “explore and communicate a variety of (socio-political) messages across the gulfs that separate the people of the country...” because there was no way one person, actor or director, could be able to tell all sides of the story (Hauptfleisch, 1997: 69). This fact is explored further by Myles Holloway:

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<sup>35</sup> Emotionally ‘prompting’.

<sup>36</sup> Fleischman gives a relatively in depth explanation of his reasoning on pages 104 and 105 of his article: *Workshop Theatre as Oppositional Form*, so I felt it unnecessary to expound upon it in this instance.

<sup>37</sup> See Chapter Two of this thesis.



...workshop plays...are of greater social authenticity and political relevance because they unambiguously articulate the voice of the masses. Intuitiveness, the immediacy of actual experience, personal privation and the rigors of operating in oppressive circumstances are reputed to imbue workshop productions with an ideology cogency and political function which transcends that attainable by the individual playwright.

- Holloway, 1993: 17

Athol Fugard is one of the prominent South African playwrights who did not wholeheartedly embrace workshop theatre techniques as a method of text writing and text creation, but still managed to create politically functional theatre<sup>38</sup>. Fugard has been a significant documenter of South African cultural history and this is the reason why it is important that one considers the times when he did utilise workshop theatre techniques. I have chosen to focus predominantly on the book: *The Dramatic Art of Athol Fugard: From South Africa to the World* (2000) by Albert Wertheim, in my discussion of Athol Fugard because this particular investigation of Fugard's plays, their meanings' and the socio-political circumstances within which each play was created, has been so comprehensively executed and laid out.

#### *Athol Fugard:*

Athol Fugard effectively used the workshop theatre improvisational method of text creation mentioned during his time with the Serpent Players in the New Brighton township in Port Elizabeth in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The products of his first workshop endeavours came after relatively long improvisation processes with the Serpent Players collaborators and were an example of the methodology that many workshop theatre practitioners came to adopt at the time. What was unique to the process of text creation in this particular group, however, was Fugard's use of visual imagery as a "generating point" for the plays (Hauptfleisch, 1991: 610). The three works: *The Coat*

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<sup>38</sup> Hauptfleisch calls Fugard "...a prime example if the playwright...[who has]...striven consciously to define his artistry in this fashion" (1991: 608), one who has evolved a "...very personal style of theatre..." (1991: 609). Fugard invests much of himself in the process and has not completely assimilated the democratic nature of workshop theatre text creation.

(1967), *Friday's Bread on Monday* (1970) and *Statements after an arrest under the Immorality Act* (1972) are exemplary of this particular visual-image stimulated plot. The first endeavour *The Coat* evolved when the coat of a man, who had been convicted and jailed and who happened to be one of their players, was sent back to his loved ones. On pages 135 and 136 of Athol Fugard's *Notebooks* (1983) there is an account of the improvisations that were done based on this image of the coat and how its reappearance in their lives may have effected the man's loved ones. The imagery which developed from these improvisations seems to draw a comparison between the fate of the coat and the choices faced by people in this nigh-on destitute situation. Can one afford to be sentimental? Fugard feels "encumbered" by what he would like to believe the woman would do: not sell the coat. But he realises that

Maybe she does. Either is possible of course – the point is Truth and honesty in dealing with either alternative. The point *not*: to sell or not to sell, yes and no. But *yes and no*, conflict, irresolution and finally just posture = I am flesh and blood, bewildered, blind, desolate. I will cling stupidly to this one thing. Already a life is crystallising around it.

- Fugard, 1983: 137

This realisation that the truth is more important than what Fugard or the group would like to see as the outcome, is typical of Fugard's process of structuring. As a result the objectivity in Fugard's plays makes them an exploration of "...a series of intensely laden images and concepts rather than [a] mere...display...or narrati[on] a conventional story in the usual sequence" (Hauptfleisch, 1991: 616)

The other two plays (mentioned above) that were embarked upon by the Serpent Players also did not involve the straightforward narration of 'usual sequence' but embraced Fugard's technique of utilising "...the particular- that is, the details and realistic surface of all life about him – to probe the fundamental human reactions to specific but generally encountered existential problems" (Hauptfleisch, 1991: 609). In both cases the group



took specific visual images of individual cases and used them to probe not only the protest element in each case but also that which makes those involved *human*.

*Friday's Bread on Monday* is based on one of the participant's (Zack) experience of a real situation. Zack witnessed children running along the road and he asked them where they were going he discovered that they were rushing to buy two day old bread from the bakery, which came at a much reduced price. The situation became a tangible illustration of people living, quite literally, below the bread line. The image led the group into an investigation of the father's situation as they considered the sacrifices he would have to make to try and feed his family. Would he sacrifice his lunch at work? Come Friday would he have to "walk to work" (Zack in Fugard, 1983: 163)? How would a disempowered situation like this make the father react? "Is he angry"? The two answers, yes and no, sparked the improvisations which investigated two of the father's possible responses – "Rebellion and resignation" and lead to the plotting of the play (Fugard, 1983: 163).

The third investigation which evolved into the text of *Statements after an arrest under the Immorality Act*, however, confirmed that in some instances there is little choice as to what your reaction will be in a disempowered situation. The images that sparked the improvisations for *Statements* were based on photographs from a police file showing a couple: "The white woman – librarian. The coloured man – teacher. The police sergeant. A constable at the typewriter... Total darkness – then the sudden, and repeated, flash of a camera...woman in her nightie, man with just his trousers on. Several positions" (Fugard, 1983: 184). The images reinforced the fact that people who transgressed the segregation laws and have sexual relations across the racial barrier are likely to become little more than 'subjects', dehumanised 'specimens' on display, like the images in the police file, subjects for gossip and little compassion (Hauptfleisch, 1991: 610)<sup>39</sup>.

Fugard's actors seemed to struggle, however, in creating a three-dimensional character for the plays. It was in 1970 that Fugard says they reached an "impasse" because the

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<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note here that during the formative stages of this particular production Fugard used Kavanagh's 'workshopped performance' format to investigate some early audience responses and adjust the production based on their feedback before finally releasing it (Astbury, 1982: 58).



actors were struggling to move past the two-dimensional performance, which engaged only the “idea” and the “intellect”, into the realm of the three-dimensional “*whole actor*” who engages himself “wholly” (Fugard, 1983: 186). Acting and presenting not only involves “...what we think, [but] also what we feel – and the latter involving a confrontation with self, happens on the basis of memories, associations, fears, sins, hopes” (Fugard, 1983: 186).

This may have been the reason why Fugard turned to the two burgeoning young talents, John Kani and Winston Ntshona (who had joined the collaborative in 1968) for what were to be his most successful collaborations: *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972) and *The Island* (1973)<sup>40</sup>. These two productions in particular showed how a collaborative, workshop theatre production without written texts or identifiable authors could, in Fugard’s words, “shatter white complacency and its conspiracy of silence<sup>41</sup>” (Fugard in Walder, 1999).

It may be important, at this point, to take a moment to consider the motivation for Fugard’s collaborations with the Serpent Players on these few occasions. Because Athol Fugard is exceptionally proactive during the production process of his plays and only used the workshop theatre process for these few projects in the 1960s and ‘70s, returning to his more formal solitary script formulation practices afterwards, one cannot help but wonder why he choose only to collaborate on these few occasions?<sup>42</sup> Part of the answer may lie in the political circumstances in which Fugard found himself as a committed writer. Fugard believes that it is society’s responsibility to take ownership of its circumstances: “our hell (history) is man-made, to that extent it can be unmade by men” (Fugard, 1983: 179). Fugard rails in particular against the apathetic stance that most of the white population assumed, at the time, regarding Government policies and foresaw a “wholesale sclerosis of the emotions and sensibilities” which would mean that there would be no chance for compassion and reconciliation (Fugard, 1983: 159). Fugard saw theatre as the medium for eliciting that compassion from his audience, by allowing them

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<sup>40</sup> The success of these particular productions is the reason why they have been chosen to further investigate Fugard’s success as a workshop theatre practitioner. Because this study is intended to focus on the issues in the plays and how they are addressed, an in depth text analysis has not been entered into.

<sup>41</sup> One cannot help but recognise a reference to Freire’s “culture of silence”.

<sup>42</sup> Hauptfleisch comments on how Fugard was involved in every part of the production process to the extent that he even cast himself in roles (Hauptfleisch, 1991: 608).



to connect with the “flesh and sweat, the human voice, [the] real pain, [the] real time” in a “living moment” of theatre, so that the “actual substance of life” would have to be blatantly confronted and could not be ignored (Fugard, 1983: 89).

Because of this controversial undertone in many of his plays Fugard had been banned from the township areas, yet he wanted to continue “bearing witness to what [was] happening in [his] time” and needed access to the creative raw material. Without access to the areas most affected by socio-political conditions Fugard had to find creative input in another way - input that only people living in those circumstances could supply. Was this the reason he collaborated with these creative performers at this particular juncture? Whatever the reason, the fact is that even in the cases of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island*, his practices only varied slightly from his usual working methods, Fugard still ended up utilising his own knowledge of dramatic structure to do a “hell of a lot of the writing” and formulation of the text. In the end he only used the work of Kani and Ntshona to bring “a basic image, a vitality, an assertion of life” (Fugard in Wertheim, 2000: 80) to the text, by drawing on the Serpent Players’ “remembered experiences of fellow actors, friends, and relatives...” (Walder, 1999).

This process is not, however, unique to Athol Fugard, it is in fact the practice of many facilitator-cum-directors, such as Malcolm Purkey (Holloway, 1993: 22) and Barney Simon, to take the ideas of the collective/ensemble and do the final scripting and word ‘magic’ on their own. Fugard, in particular uses the power of words and his text-writing skills to not only localise his theatre, through dialects, but also uses words as a means of “...coming to terms with, defining, explaining, [and even] gaining control of a reality the characters have difficulty comprehending” (Hauptfleisch, 1991: 611- 612).

The use of words in gaining control of one’s situation is an extremely important thread running throughout many of Fugard’s plays, including *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. Control is gained when one gives something a name because then that abstract concept becomes an entity, a form that can be tackled and dealt with. Men of colour during the period in which *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* is set were going through a form of identity crises; stripped of



their capacity to earn and support their families by the strict regulations of the passbooks and stripped of their homes by the forced evictions, the male coloured population becomes an “appalling wreckage of human lives” created by South African society (Fugard, 1983: 206). When all a man wants to do is “live his life” (Fugard, 1983: 207) he will go to measures as desperate as assuming the name of a dead man, an act which in itself brings on a new form of identity crises and begs the question: what is a name, only words?

It is interesting to note, in connection with the issue of the ‘handle’ that words give the characters on a situation, that the opening scene of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* was not given ‘words’ or structured by the playwright at all. Based on the visual image of a man sitting alone at a table with a cigarette in one hand and a pipe in another, the opening scene resonates with an image of a man alone and at a crossroads (Hauptfleisch, 1991: 610). This opening scene, in which Styles reads newspaper headlines, also performed the alternate function of keeping the play “au courant” because each performance was improvised and had spontaneous innovations. This meant that the script was in keeping with current affairs and that each performance was unique to each new audience. Wertheim believes that the direct address of the audience is a throwback to Brecht and his *Verfremdungseffekt*, but that ignores argument for the oral tradition. Although Fugard was conscious of the European convention<sup>43</sup>, the two actors who created/improvised the material would not necessarily be alienating their audience through the direct address and “metatheatrical style” but rather using the direct address to include their audience as co-conspirators in the “potentially Communist” sentiments (Wertheim, 2000: 80)<sup>44</sup>.

As with other workshop productions this opening scene also reflects the collage of characters that can grow from a situation where stories are collected and situations improvised from the basic ideas and contributions of members of the ensemble. “The

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<sup>43</sup> Fugard mentions the influences of Grotowski’s theories about the “prostituted actor” and the “holy actor” (Fugard in Wilhelm, 1982: 111) and also mentions influences of Beckett (on his characters) and speaks of Brecht and his “admiration” of him (Fugard in Wilhelm, 1982: 111-112).

<sup>44</sup> Fugard explained these influences to both actors and emphasised how he wanted “the holy actor as opposed to the courtesan actor” to emerge from their explorations (Fugard, 1983: 201).



play is therefore built up out of the personalities initially involved, and the script becomes merely an edited version of their creative process. The value of such an exercise is that it leads to a truly *alternative* cultural form” (Hauptfleisch & Steadman, 1983: 171). The long Styles monologue at the beginning where he moves smoothly in and out of different characters not only foreshadows sequences from *Woza Albert!* (1981) but also demonstrates the vibrant results that can be gained from the process of improvisation<sup>45</sup>. The inclusion of such a scene seems to extend the functionality of the role-playing device to include ‘acting’ a part as a survival technique in the South African political context<sup>46</sup>. For Fugard the very essence of theatre and the very reason for theatre-making is “seeing others playing their roles, [and how it] enables [the character in the play, and those watching] to see his own situation clearly and with perspective” (Wertheim, 2000: 81).

The play has a definite sense of the political agenda of those involved in its conception<sup>47</sup>. The photos that Styles takes, as part of his new career, could be considered as symbolic of an attempt to re-claim the scattered communities of the black people – those who are forced into urbanisation for survival. The photos become a record of the “...poor, the non-literate, the necessarily nomadic South African blacks...the photos [are]... cherished possessions, the only record they have of family history, the only remembrance of parents, siblings, relatives, ancestors” (Wertheim, 2000: 82). This seems to be an echo of the oral tradition, which, in the verbomotor communal context used to be utilised in the remembrance of loved ones and ancestors. *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, therefore, becomes a political weapon; “a subversive historiography”, a method of rewriting the present so that in the future the lives of the *others*, that have been “written out of the histories produced by white historians”, can be remembered (Wertheim, 2000: 82). The play stands as a visual and graphic testament to the lives of those living with a black skin in South Africa

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<sup>45</sup> Long speeches like this are also a marker of the “didacticism that underlies Fugard’s writing” (Hauptfleisch, 1991: 612).

<sup>46</sup> It was certainly a tactic for those imprisoned on Robben Island who would cheer each other with “improvised bioscope” (Norman’s account in Fugard, 1983: 152)

<sup>47</sup> Some of the plot is apparently based on the experiences of a man named Melton (Fugard, 1983: 206)



because: “As Kani and Ntshona are Fugard’s conduit to the townships, so are they also the audience’s” (Wertheim, 2000: 84).<sup>48</sup>

The second of this collaborative’s workshopped successes, *The Island*, began with images formed in Fugard’s consciousness, which was then transmitted to the actors with whom he worked so intimately, for them to *pad out*. These three core images were “space”, “time” and “Meaningless Absurd Labour” (Fugard, 1983: 212). “My work with the actors during one stage of the rehearsals is for both rehearsing and improvising” (Fugard in Wertheim, 2000:88). Working again with John Kani and Winston Ntshona, Fugard would come prepared with questions, ideas, and provocations in order to provide the artists with a constant stream of thought-enticing subject matter, relating to his pre-prepared idea. Politically, Fugard was seeking to expound insights into the reality of the situation to bring about change in his audience, and creatively he was utilising individuals who were truly “at the rock face” so to speak.

To aid Fugard’s political message in *The Island*, he took on two Greek legends that he believed would appropriately illustrate the anti-apartheid-establishment or anti-capitalist message. The opening sequence of the play undoubtedly echoes the first of these myths: the *Myth of Sisyphus*. The audience share the frustration and confusion at the futility of the actor’s action in the agonising ten minute opening scene, becoming “voyeurs” to the dehumanising and futile lives of the prisoners (Wertheim, 2000: 90), as they engage in the “Sisyphean labour of pointlessly digging sand at one end of the stage, filling a wheelbarrow with it, pushing the wheelbarrow to the other end of the stage and emptying the sand” (Wertheim, 2000: 89). The actors themselves make even more meaningful contact with the futility of their actions as they are forced to physically undergo the frustrating enactment over and over, and they therefore, do not only “enact but [also] undergo what hundreds of men were undergoing every day of their lives in South African prisons” (Wertheim, 2000: 90).

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<sup>48</sup> There is also a universality to the action in the play – suggested by the character names: “In Xhosa, “*sizwe*” means nation and “*banzi*” broad or wide; thus “*sizwe banzi*” connotes the black nations as a whole [and] “*Buntu*” means humankind” (Wertheim, 2000: 86).



The second of the myths, *Antigone*, is a legend which most potently illustrates the battle between the state law and the individual will. It is little wonder, therefore, that the collaborators chose the story of Antigone as another reference to the “history of protest” (Wertheim, 2000: 94)<sup>49</sup>. By sharing in the defiance of Antigone, the prisoners also share her transcendence over circumstance: “Antigone, like Sisyphus and like the Robben Island prisoners, knows the consequences of her deeds...but she thereby comes to know an existential, happy transcendence over tragedy” (Wertheim, 2000: 97). The play and the ‘play within a play’ become a “subversive means to enlightenment and political engagement” (Wertheim, 2000: 95) for both the imagined prison audience and the real theatre audience, allowing them to “achieve an understanding and renewed commitment to struggle in spite of the horror of the situation” (Crow in Wertheim, 2000: 95). And the play is concerned with the connection of the two abovementioned myths so that “...the plight of Sisyphus can be connected with and transformed into the power of Antigone” (Wertheim, 2000: 90).

Acting is also an important element in the creation and execution of *The Island*. The actors, in true workshop fashion, improvised situations in the investigation and exploration of the subject. Improvisation being the tool “through which an actor learns to understand and practice a role – becomes the means through which John and Winston understand and practice their humanity” (Wertheim, 2000: 89). But the endeavour of acting also came to metaphorically represent even more; in that it was not only a means of “acting out of one’s life” but also as “acting as a form of survival, and acting as a basis for (political) action” (Wertheim, 2000: 88).

Acting became a function of the survival tactics, of not only the actors, but the characters they had developed and were playing:

Acting...becomes both a shield and sword to the two prisoners: as a means of self-protection, for protection of Self, and as a means for taking action or

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<sup>49</sup> They had, as a group with the Serpent Players produced the entire script of Sophocles’ *Antigone* before including in the play in 1965 (Gray, 1982: 7).

acting against their captors, against the state. Fugard thus asserts that acting is not idle art, no end in itself, but the very essence of life of being human.

- Wertheim, 2000: 89

The humanising and liberating effect of the practice of acting is intended to ring true as a positive message for those watching as they witness that, despite all of the dehumanising tactics used on the two men in the play (and on men in similar situations in real life) they still remain "...triumphantly human" and their captors are reduced to the bestial state of the Hodoshe "flesh fly" (as the white guard is called in the piece) (Wertheim, 2000: 91)<sup>50</sup>. The liberating effects are conveyed to the audience by the very human allegorical references in the play too. The apparent brotherhood that the two men share – Winston exclaims: "*Nyana we Sizwe*" ("brother of the land"), a brotherhood that fosters the "indomitability of the two men's human spirit" (Wertheim, 2000: 91). Because of this every performance is a remembrance of the actors' brothers in incarceration on the lonely island. There is a fusing of Hopelessness (metaphysical predicament) and Hope (historical predicament):

... the reality, the Truth that is both, even as a coin is both heads and tails. Maybe that is what the Robben Island idea must be about. A dialogue, an encounter, opposition and then resolution between Hopelessness (life sentence) and Hope (... 'my appeal has succeeded; I've only got six months to go').

- Fugard, 1983: 206

The actions of the prisoners in *The Island* also seem to echo those of the theatre practitioners involved in workshop theatre, in that, the prisoners use what little resources they have in order to get their up-lifting story told. They use their talents as "consummate personal storytellers...who love acting out their lives" (Fugard in Wertheim, 2000: 88), and utilise the "...combined projections of their imaginations, narrations, and physical gestures" to create creative imagery (Wertheim, 2000: 92). The

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<sup>50</sup> The dehumanising acts visited upon the men in the play are based on the transcribed accounts of Welcome (the trip to the Robben Island and his time with a young 15 year old boy – Fugard, 1983: 145 & 153) and Norman (his story of the triumphant "Chain of Sympathy" – Fugard, 1983: 151)



prison becomes a microcosmic example of the endless possibilities available to those who choose to utilise the resources available to them – “fictive imagination, rhetoric, and gesture” so that acting can become a means of survival. “And clearly, for Fugard *acting* in the sense of making theatre and acting in the sense of making a commitment are two sides of the same coin” (Wertheim, 2000: 92).

The final metaphor, however, is driven home by the fact that the actors retain their actual names, and the fact that the audience ‘become’ the ‘prison’ audience in the enactment of the play. These superimposed meanings infer for the audience that:

The Island is not merely Robben Island but South Africa itself, an absurd prison with absurd rules enforced by absurd officials. South African citizens, be they non-white or white, are as much immured or imprisoned as either the heroine in Sophocles’ play or the prisoners in Fugard’s<sup>51</sup>.

- Wertheim, 2000: 98

Ultimately, Fugard was concerned with the construction of a sound dramatic text that would bring about insight and change, and although his political vision was in keeping with the practitioners and facilitators who worked predominantly with the workshop theatre process, his later work did not make use of this creative process. Whether it was because he no longer needed the actors as conduits to the townships, bringing him the ‘raw material’ he was banned access to, or maybe this is merely because he felt his dramatic art was more effective without tertiary input. For Fugard the art was paramount, and the political message best put across by better art. This may be why, at times he was accused of being lukewarm or not radical enough, but those who say this fail to acknowledge that an artist may be forced to sacrifice political correctness for larger political ends. Fugard admits to striving “quite consciously and deliberately for ambiguity of expression because it is superior to singleness of meaning and reflects the nature of life” (Fugard, 1983: 183). Those who misunderstand Fugard’s ambiguous intention with a non-committal stance may need to consider that had Fugard’s plays been

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<sup>51</sup> This reference, incidentally, was as far as Fugard was willing to go by way of audience involvement choosing to “relate” to them rather than “assault” them (Fugard, 1982: 109).

as acerbic as his accusers would have them be, they may not have been produced at all and may not have made an effective appeal to their audiences. “White writers like Fugard and novelist Alan Paton, writing in apartheid South Africa, are nowadays rejected for their moderation by post-apartheid critics, but one must remember that it was their moderation that drew world attention to the outrages of apartheid” (Wertheim, 2000: 3). Fugard has always been an artist of integrity and moral commitment but was not always what could be termed a ‘hardened activist’, instead he believed that “the emphasis [of a play] should be on the political effects of the work of art rather than in the effectiveness of public protest” (Gussow in Wertheim, 2000: 187).

*Barney Simon:*

Barney Simon by contrast, rarely used any other method of creation besides workshop theatre during his career. He was a practitioner whose concerns were far more narrative. Simon was primarily interested in “exploring South African stories that had not been told before”, and in connection with this, Simon found that workshop theatre’s creative process and vision was the most conducive to his aims for theatre (and its message) (Fugard in Benson, 1997: 5).

Like many of the other liberal practitioners in South Africa, creating during the slow decline of apartheid, Barney Simon sought to uncover political inconsistencies and injustices in his immediate environment. South African theatre at this time was inextricably bound to the political tone that it decided to take and Simon’s vision was no different. His vision included a very real confrontation of the situation and circumstances because, as he says:

Our lives at best are a blur of our intentions. Without confrontation, however wise, skilful or articulate our posture, there is just a blur. Only do dangerous things...

- Simon in Benson 1997: 41



Confrontation, was something that Simon had witnessed the effectiveness of not only during his time in South Africa but also, interestingly enough, during his time in New York, when he had been exposed to the lower echelons of society, where he witnessed the grime and grit and the “cruelty and innocence” that was human existence and inevitable confrontation (Simon in Benson, 1997: 40). So Barney Simon’s experience of his surroundings, coupled with the politics of finance, were instrumental in shaping the structure and execution of Simon’s production process.

Financially, Simon was quick to realise that if he wanted to make the independent political statements that he intended, he could not utilise the fund raising practices available in South Africa at the time. This was because the arts councils, who were the providers for much of the monetary support of South African practitioners during the apartheid era, were government run. Barney Simon could obviously not, if he wished to maintain his political integrity, accept “subsidy from the South African government, which was an apartheid regime”, so eventually he got into the “habit” of never attempting to raise money (Deavere Smith, 1995: 14). With financial autonomy came political autonomy and Simon, after having been exposed to the theories and practice of Joseph Chaikin and Jerzy Grotowski, realised that in financial poverty one could find the richness that is a long term group project, and the individual growth that was facilitated by modest means, when the individual was one’s only resource. Grotowski had shown him that all an artist needed was a desire for “self-renewal” and the determination to “turn toward [one’s] own life...and make that life entirely visible, using [one’s] own specific, intimate, authentic experiences” (Grotowski in Benson, 1995: 62).

These ideas of personal growth and transformation are also accredited to Simon’s interest in the theoretical principles of the Cubist artist Georges Braque. Braque sought to represent the world “as seen from a number of different viewpoints” (Anson & Hodge, 2002) as a completely “nonillusionistic and nonimitative” (Dabrowski, 1997) realm where there was a “potential metaphor in all things” and a “possibilit[y] for transformation” (Benson, 1997: 45) and “metamorphoses” (Deavere Smith, 1995: 14) in all things. This ‘possibility for transformation’ became Simon’s credo and he began to



foster a sense of hopefulness aided by what Mary Benson describes as his “delicate antennae reacting to the needs of others” (1997: 45). He had come to acknowledge the dichotomy between what one expects and what one hopes for. Simon’s hope was that artists could spend their time “working for what [they] hope for not what [they] expect” (Tomkins, 1995: 94).

One of Barney Simon’s first political (and relatively theatrical) endeavours was a theatre-for-development project with the nurses of Bakers’ Mission Hospital in Zululand in 1970<sup>52</sup>. Simon had come to observe, what could only be termed, a gross failure of communication between the nurses, who were trained by white doctors (to do a job not their vocation), and the indigenous and often illiterate patients. Simon’s job as facilitator, in this particular situation, was to open the avenues of communication through “Sensitivity Training” (Simon in Tomkins, 1995: 91). *Sensitivity training* was aimed at introducing the women to extracurricular activities, like embroidery and ballroom dancing, the ultimate purpose of which, was to achieve the key to breaking the barriers in communication: that key was gossip. This spontaneous conversing tool was Simon’s secret weapon in getting the women to interact on the level of black women, not trained nurses, and was the initial step that allowed the women to voice frustrations. This done, they could then move on to help their community.

The women began to “look, listen and question what they saw” (Simon in Tomkins, 1995: 91). Simon would send the women “incognito” into the villages, after which they were asked to report back on what they saw. The women began to look at the villagers with new eyes and with a new sense of respect for the local people and ultimately themselves. The nurses created a localised theatre, utilising the vernacular of that area, to create predominantly musical theatre, where they took traditional and community songs, and created new lyrics on topical issues like breastfeeding and tuberculosis. The performances became the perfect vehicle for communication between the nurses and the illiterate people, and provided an avenue of expression and process of enlightenment for the “virtually non-educated” (Simon in Tomkins 1995: 94) black population, who would

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<sup>52</sup> This project could also be considered workers’ theatre.



often compose songs to answer and acknowledge lessons learned. Ultimately then, the process was also inadvertently fighting the apathy that Simon had noticed in many of the school children of these areas by getting them involved.

The success of this work began to cultivate a mindset in Simon that he brought to fruition during his time at the Market Theatre; that theatre should be a mirror to the societal conditions of real people, so as to show the ill-educated white population what they chose to ignore. Simon saw the potential for theatre as a weapon and humour as a means of wielding that weapon.

Simon used this weapon to re-write contemporary history with *Cincinatti* (1979) and *Born in the RSA* (1985), as Athol Fugard had tried to do with *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. Both of these plays took their audiences through a montage of life in South Africa as told through true-to-life “arias”<sup>53</sup>. Simon was committed to creating a “theatre of relevance” that would not only reflect the lives of the actors themselves but also act as a forum of the “suppressed news” of the time (Simon in Benson 1997: 98). The plays became contemporary newsreels or “living newspaper[s]” for the ‘uninformed’ masses, reminding people of what freedom is, who the heroes of their time really were, and what life on the streets had come to entail (Simon in Benson, 1995: 128).

Simon also went about the representation of these events, in what could be considered as a slightly more accessible way than Fugard. Simon did not like the “dramatic things in one’s life”, but preferred to investigate the ‘little things’ that the audience could relate to and even find humorous (Benson, 1995: 98-99). His aim was the “laughter of recognition” and “tears of recognition” (Cooke in Benson, 1995: 100), which he believed could be achieved by placing a mirror to South African society, so that “we might find images of ourselves and each other, and be visible to each other in juxtaposition with each other” (Simon in Tomkins, 1995: 86). Simon wished for people to look at and learn from each other, and ultimately to get excited about each other when they were exposed to the beautiful treasure that is cultural diversity. This mirroring process required the

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<sup>53</sup> Or lyrical narratives, delivered as a monologue.

actors to speak “from the centre of themselves to the centres of others” (Simon in Benson 1995: 98), and to “distil... crude truths out of the complexities and contradictions that were the culture of apartheid” (Smith, 1995: 84).

Although Simon acknowledged that everyone was capable of ‘extraordinary dreams’, he believed that not all were willing or capable of showing the beauty that is within. Simon needed actors who were willing to illuminate the world around them, extend people’s vision and help people to accept responsibility. Simon’s new breed of actor had a “fantastic pragmatism...[which made them want to] work and...work and work again, and they’ll fix and they’ll play and they’ll tighten, and they’ll keep making, and then it somehow takes a form” (Simon in Deavere Smith, 1995: 14). The hard work of individuals allowed for a theatre that regularly produced the effects that mattered most to Barney Simon: that of interaction between human beings and the surprises that could result from such interactions. This is what he termed the dynamics of a production, how the actors related to each other, the text and the audience – as paramount (and existent), long before sets or even lights are thought of.

To train these actors Simon called again on the theories of Chaikin and Grotowski, this time not for their philosophies, but for their pragmatic training methods, which involved not only warm ups and voice exercises but also meditation. These training methods were used in eradicating the ‘blocks’ in the actor’s subconscious’ so that they could be uninhibited in their presentation of themselves to their audience. Actors were required to be patient, and most importantly disciplined, so that they could find a quiet inner space whatever the outer and inner ‘happenings’ or goings-on. As part of this disciplined process Simon required his actors to assault the ‘shadows’ of their own ignorance and fear so as to develop the skills to dissolve the same ignorance and fears in their audience. Once the “lies and clichés” of their own consciousness were eliminated then the communion of story-telling would allow for the “nurturing” rather than “changing” of their audience to take place (Simon in Benson, 1995: 152) through a “combination of ruthless honesty and extraordinary compassion” (Fugard on Simon in Benson, 1995: 162).



As director or facilitator under these circumstances, Barney Simon was also careful to define his role and level of involvement in the workshop process. Simon saw himself as a “catalyst” and saw it as his responsibility to stimulate each actor’s “specific biography...[which was] unrepeated since creation” (Simon in Tomkins, 1995: 92). What he was trying to do was incorporate each person’s idiosyncratic vision of themselves and their circumstances so that they could make the sincerest gift of all to their audience: the “gift of themselves” (Simon in Tomkins, 1995: 92).

The journey towards making a gift of themselves, and the stories they had to tell, went hand-in-hand with the journey through the process of text creation, which included: *observation*, *improvisation* and *selection* (Fleischman, 1990: 100).

#### Observation:

The first step the text creation process required the actors to undergo a process of research and investigation, a departure point which not only became an earmark of Barney Simon’s work, but also of many of the workshop theatre practitioners working as his contemporaries (and thereafter). The initial ‘investigation’ or ‘observation’ stages of Simon’s rehearsal process were undoubtedly influenced by his time working at the mission hospital, and required his actors to actually observe “people in the course of their everyday actions of the roles that they play in life”, in efforts to ‘inform’ their views of everyday life in South Africa (Fleischman, 1990: 101).

Simon realised that if he wanted to make the ‘real life’ representation of his plays accessible, he would need to address circumstances that were as close as possible to the actual social reality of the people of the time. That is why he tried (like Chaikin and others) to get his actors to immerse themselves completely in circumstances and realms of experience to which they had not necessarily been exposed. For productions like *Cincinatti* (1979) and *Outers* (1985) Simon required his casts to investigate and observe certain circumstances first hand. In the case of *Cincinatti*, the group was sent out into the clubs and “underbelly” of South African society to find the grit and grime of life in the

1970s. The result was a patchwork of Simon's "arias" told by very real and specifically South African characters, with the narrative taking the form of a progressive argument, revolving around the affect that the closing of a multi-racial nightclub can have on the lives of those who had worked and revelled there.

In the case of *Outers* Simon took this one step further. The plot revolved around the subculture and close-knit microcosm of the world of homeless people in South Africa, and more specifically Joubert Park. During the period of investigation for this particular production, Simon asked his actors to live as though they were people of this particular group, living out-of-doors, in the elements and socialising with these individuals (Whyle, 2003). Importantly, however, they were also exposed to the manner in which members of the upper (and even middle) echelons of society treated this group of people. This possibly harrowing and undoubtedly eye-opening experience could be considered an extreme, yet effective, version of the observation and immersion that Simon believed was necessary for accurate text creation, through empathy, it "...demonstrates Simon's fundamental humanism [and the fact that] he was more interested in people than ideas..." (De Waal, 1997)

This investigative process was also successfully used in Simon's consummate work, *Woza Albert!* (1981). This collaboration with the talented Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa was the ultimate example of a successful workshop theatre piece and how it can function as theatre of relevance and recognition. The 'field research', with which Simon had found prior success, was re-utilised during the preparations for *Woza Albert!*. The actors were asked, as before, to go out and observe and interact with people living at grassroots level. This allowed the actors to develop a composite picture of their target audience while gathering the necessary material for the creation of characters to which their target audience could relate. Not only did *Woza Albert!* incorporate the frugality of Simon's previous productions, but it was also imbued with a measure of Simon's proactive spirit; the play became exemplary of the revitalising capabilities of South African theatre and is one of the best examples of how one can harness a quality, that had become



an integral part of both workers' and workshop theatre productions: the liberating possibilities of laughter.

#### Improvisation:

The next step in Barney Simon's process was the actual improvisations. This involved taking the experiences that were gleaned during the research period and making a more polished and recognisably whole presentation. With the help of the multi-talented actors, they improvised to create the pieces that would be fused together in order to create a final product. And this final product would then hopefully allow the actors and audience to "commune", through empathetic or sympathetic involvement, around the issue chosen by the actors and director (Hauptfleisch, 1997: 132). In the case of *Woza Albert!* Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa's talents were crucial assets in the successful improvisation period, because, not only did they have a uniquely ethnic and personal experience and the researched experience gathered during their time 'incognito', but they also had at their disposal an abundance of talent and a dedicated mindset<sup>54</sup>. The actors' own skills and abilities gave them the capacity to try out new things when it came to character creation. They challenged themselves to go beyond the limitations of their meagre finances and find innovative ways of achieving colourful and idiosyncratic individual characters without the aid of makeup design and costume. Ngema and Mtwa were even required to make all sound effects using their vocal talents. But all of this, "making do with what they had", meant that the cast of *Woza Albert!* was ultimately versatile enough to play in any given environment. The apparent portability of such productions allowed them to be performed in different spaces, for varying amounts of people, countrywide.

#### Selection:

The pinnacle of the workshop process in creating the improvised-text, would be to record and write down what had been *found* during the production process. Once the actors

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<sup>54</sup> This was called a "divine pragmatism", by Simon, and was an intricate part of their social vision – in Deavere Smith, 1995:14.

have finished *playing* and improvising with the ‘investigation material’, the text is refined. Selection is a two-part process, firstly discussion is held with the actors regarding which scenes they would like to select or reject, and the second step requires the facilitator-director (practitioners like Simon) to “take [all the material and suggestions] away, edit, add his own special lines – give it his quality, his ‘stamp’” and ultimately formulate the written text (Cooke in Benson, 1995: 98). This has become the role of the South African workshop theatre director: to utilise the stories and perceptions of the multitalented individuals in their cast and to give them an opportunity to work, together with the director/facilitator, in the formulation of fresh and real theatre. Hauptfleisch believes that Simon is a “remarkable ‘prime mover’” in this particular method of workshop text creation, because as a creative writer himself he has the ability to “...inspire group cohesion and creation while at the same time welding together the often disparate ideas of his heterogeneous cast into some kind of aesthetic unity” (Hauptfleisch, 1997: 133). Working in a generative capacity on a piece, however, undoubtedly gives the cast of productions like *Woza Albert!*, among others, a feeling of *ownership* of the piece, and allows for the education and growth of its audience, as well as those participating in its creation.

Ultimately a process like Barney Simon’s improvisational creation of a workshopped text enables directors to make poignant, and possibly even financially viable, theatre which is not “didactic...”, but relies instead “on satire caricature, absurdity and pathos to make its [emotive] point” that can touch the lives of those who are exposed to it in positive and newly personal ways (Holloway, 1993: 23).

### Conclusion:

An artist who has not been mentioned, but is most certainly notable, is the practitioner Mbongeni Ngema. His creation of the piece *Asinamali!* (1985), was a textbook example of a successfully workshopped and collectively improvisation-created text, documenting the rent boycott campaign of Msizi Dube. Although this endeavour produced a result of some repute, it is relatively difficult to source information on the methods and creative



process of this particular practitioner and this particular production, and it is for this reason that he has not been included in this particular chapter in a section of his own.

Something else that should be mentioned is a factor that many believe to be the *disadvantage* of theatre of this kind and that is its apparent lack of longevity. As Albert Wertheim puts it: “The lives of many political plays are coterminous with the currency of the political issues they address” (Wertheim, 2000: 99). Workshop theatre is no different; it is political theatre inextricably linked to its contemporary political environment. For this reason some believe that once the political issues a certain play is dealing with have been resolved, the play itself becomes redundant. But Myles Holloway believes that each play’s significance extends beyond the events that they portray, because in many cases the works function not only to bear witness to a specific manifestation of oppression, but also tends to touch on larger human truths (like the archetypal political truths touched on in *The Island*). Although the scripted versions of the performance become a thorough indication of the events of a certain period and the sentiments of those who lived through such times, they also come to signify what can be achieved through the “communality of human endeavour” (Holloway, 1993: 18), they are a “...tribute to the suffering and endurance of those imprisoned by the apartheid regime...” either physically or mentally (Wertheim, 2000: 99).

One cannot deny the influence that the techniques have had, not only in South Africa, but in theatre world wide. The frugal minimalism of workshop and workers’ theatre has made these forms truly accessible to all. Even if those making the plays nowadays do not have the immense political motivation that the founders of the movement did (e.g. that of Apartheid) anything that is worth saying, is worth saying through workshop theatre. Workshop theatre is accessible, unique and idiosyncratically individualistic; qualities which give plays created in this fashion an immediacy that endears them to audiences and gives the cast a chance to immortalise a piece of themselves through a form that not only gives them ownership of something meaningful but a voice to tell the world how meaningful that something is.

## **Chapter Four:**

### **Practical Discoveries**

#### **Introduction:**

When I first set out to create the text *A Tale of Two Titties*, my understanding of the applications and creative innovations precipitated by improvisation techniques was very limited; like many others still training in the theatre industry. It was during the process of text creation that I came to truly discover these factors. In this chapter, therefore, I will be recording some personal reflections on the techniques which have effected my approach to the improvisation process, as well as some of my own discoveries regarding which of those same techniques I found to be effective and which techniques were less-functional in my particular circumstances.

Having studied Drama as a Matriculation subject at High School, I had a pretty clear idea of what the *technical* definition of the term improvisation was, and that it had been used extensively in the democratic workshop production process which had allowed for the creation of texts like *Woza Albert!* (which we studied in Std 9<sup>55</sup>). From these studies the more all-encompassing impression of improvisation was that it was an independent practice with its own set of exercises rather than a process that could be used as a means to an end; for the exploration of themes, the fleshing-out of already established characters or even text creation.

But upon commencement of my undergraduate studies at university, I was exposed to improvisation in a far more practical sense and my horizons and interests were broadened as regards improvisation's possible applications. Firstly, in acting classes, improvisation was used as part of a greater loosening-up process, although the exercises were far less structured than Marowitz or Boal would have liked, the exercises did help us to overcome some of our performance anxieties and self-consciousness. One of the most memorable examples of this kind of exploration took place in our acting class with Johan

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<sup>55</sup> Or Grade 11 as it now called.



Esterhuizen. As an exercise in the investigation of emotion and its expression in a text he asked us to go to the extreme with the text. We were to read the text, firstly, with extreme anger and contempt for one another and then secondly, as though everything your counterpart was saying were incredibly funny. The exercise worked to bring new vigour to an otherwise bland and possibly over-naturalised performance of a text that apparently had far more inherent potential.

But the classes that most broadened my horizons as an undergraduate student and introduced me to improvisation's potential in the process of creation was the movement classes with Samantha Pinaar, where we explored physicalisation of a role. One exercise, that I believe worked most effectively, was that in which Pinaar gave us a sequence of movements that were completely neutral, but not without potential. Once we had collectively learnt the sequence, we were required (in pairs) to bring the movements to *life* infusing them with energy. This energy could be in the form of characterisation or a loose plot, but the energy necessarily needed to stem from, not only the feeling that we gleaned from the movement, but also from our own creative interpretation of the sequence. Ultimately, one cannot help but improvise when it comes to this process, as a pair, you strive to find the interpretation that is *most* true to the moment and your feeling when executing them – for this, one tries out many different options until you find which one “fits”.

Later classes and exercises in movement required us to create entire sequences. In these cases improvisation was the only vessel for creation of group work of this kind. The creative process became one of interacting, taking impulses from one another and then later accepting or rejecting certain assemblies, as congruous to the greater creative and thematic focus or not.

I do admit however, that up until I embarked on my Grahamstown endeavour, I had not discovered the capacity of improvisation for text creation, possibly because movement classes were not my personal forte. Of course we dealt with this area of text creation in

theory, during our discussions on South African workshop theatre in the Theatre History classes, but had not, as yet experienced it practically.

#### Grahamstown Production 2002:

Each year the students of the Drama department at the University of Stellenbosch elect a Grahamstown Committee and a Grahamstown Text-selection Sub-Committee. The Main Committee's job is really the administration and organisation of the tour and fundraising, while the Sub-committee is given the difficult task of selecting a text. This is obtained by requesting submissions of either a complete text or an outline of the characters, plot and themes of proposed play. One of the submissions is then chosen and sometimes the playwright is also afforded the opportunity of *directing* the production. This is what happened in my case.

My submission outlined my intention to write a text about the quirky and endearing life-so-far of a 30-something character called Allegra (with the name alluding to the possible allegorical references). The plot was to trace Allegra's life through the innocence of pre-primary school years, the embarrassments of puberty and right into the farce that is the dating game. I wanted to create a text that would give my audience a light-hearted and semi-comical look at (and reminder of) what it is like to be a certain age, as well as looking at of how wonderful life is and how precious the idiosyncratic development of each individual can be.

Because of this outline I was afforded the opportunity of embarking on a workshopped theatre process. To be completely frank, the choice to use the workshop process to write the text was due more to my of lack of confidence in myself as *text-creator*, than as a sign of an overwhelming interest in (and support of) improvisation as a creative process. I was admittedly daunted by the responsibility of writing and directing a play. The task of creating the text from nothing – a text which would both suit and inspire one's cast, drove me to relying on others, not only for approval but for meaningful input. I thought



that workshoping the production would be the *easy* way out; I was later to discover how wrong I had been.

Because I knew little or nothing about the practicalities of the improvisation process: where to begin, what exercises to use? I set about, rather randomly, reading whatever resources I could get my hands on. The sources looked at were: Samuel Elkind's *Improvisation Handbook* (1975), Keith Johnstone's *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (1979), and to a slightly lesser extent, Hodgson and Richards' *Improvisation: Discovery and Creativity in Drama* (1966). I had an idea that my own intuition would lead me in the right direction, but decided that I would need some help in coming up with the right *kinds* of exercises with which to meet my ends. I was however, determined not to become bogged down with theoretical "dos and don'ts" so I quite literally, selected what seemed to me to be appropriate exercises, observed their outcomes and then planned the next exercises for the next rehearsal.

#### Exercises:

When it came to selecting the appropriate exercises for the process, I established my own criteria for selection. Because there were so many exercises to choose from I narrowed down my choices by selecting the exercises that seemed more likely to achieve my specific aims. To begin with I took into account each exercise's level of difficulty in relation to the group's level of development, and therefore the exercise's appropriateness for the group. I initially chose relatively simple games, ones which did not require too much explanation, so that the participants could get out of it what *they* wanted – not what I thought they should get out of it. I did, however, focus on developing three areas of their performance: their physicality, their mental elasticity or flexibility and their trust in one another (as well as their comfort in one another's presence).

It was only as the creative process developed that I began to give the cast more challenging and revealing exercises aimed at stretching them imaginatively and allowing

them to be relaxed enough to perform whatever actions came into their heads – without regard for what the others may think of them as an individual.

The discussions below deal with the general principles and some examples, but a complete list of exercises can be found in Appendix B.

### *Opener Exercises:*

The first number of exercises were selected purely for their *fun* value, motivated by my belief that as adults, we have forgotten how to *play*. Therefore, those exercises that I selected as “openers” for each evening’s proceedings were games aimed at enabling the actors to warm up their voices and their bodies without being conscious of the fact that they were doing so. The silliness of some of the exercises actually helped to break the ice as well, since the actors got to have fun creatively and expose the more spontaneous side of their personalities.

One of the most important issues that I emphasised in my work with the group was, as is the case with playing games, there are no rules as to what is right and wrong. The most important element of a game is to achieve the objectives, no matter how you do so. So there aren’t any *rules* as they are essentially understood; innovation is preferable to “getting it right”.

I also tried to convey to the participants that the aim of each exercise was to be spontaneous. When thought influences response it only functions to slow down the flow of action and convolute the process. I asked the participants to rather to bear in mind that there is *no* right or wrong answer or response, the exercises were an *end* in themselves – not a *means to an end*.

The emphasis on spontaneity allowed me to introduce the participants to the next concept – what I would call *creative limbering*.



### *Creative Limbering Exercises:*

Before engaging in this series of exercises, I was determined to re-emphasise that no participant's idea/contribution is worthless, stupid or undesirable, but rather that every single contribution, if not applicable or useful for that particular endeavour, may in turn, spark off a new trend, or be useful at a later stage.

In order to relax the actors further, I attempted to convey to them that the art that we were engaged in was not primarily self-expression, because that kind of attitude brings the *individual* under scrutiny. The point of the interactions was *not* to judge one's individual skill or lack thereof; it was to be explicitly clear that they were not being adjudicated during the course of the creative exercises. These assertions were in keeping with the concepts of Keith Johnstone, who sought not the *sub-conscious* but the *anti-conscious*: a "momentary passing madness which is found in all real creators" (1979: 79). Johnstone emphasised that, although ideas may seem absurd in isolation, later collations between the findings could lead to something great.

The final request I made of my group was to keep what goes on in the sessions as private as possible. This was, as I explained, to further reduce the fear of assessment and even judgement; judgement that may have been allocated by peers outside of the group situation. This particular kind of feedback is definitely not conducive to creativity.

### *Keith Johnstone's Theories:*

In connection with the creative limbering I think it important to briefly mention some more of Keith Johnstone's concepts. He believes that there are three main reasons why individuals learned, often at a scholastic level, *not* to be spontaneous! The three elements of impulsive thought are suppressed through social learning: the psychotic, the obscene and the unoriginal. The social environment's labelling of these kinds of reactions as "undesirable" is the beginnings of *blocks* in creativity and experimentation.

Firstly, psychotic thought is the direct opposite of the *sanity pretence* we define and establish, through learnt behaviour, and out of fear of rejection. Johnstone found the unpredictability of such actions desirable because they allowed the “forbidden” thoughts to flow into one’s consciousness (1979: 84). This kind of playfulness, in an environment of acceptance can lead to the exorcising of “demons”. The unpredictable is, therefore, to be commended and can even be comical – in a situation where everyone laughs *with* one another and not *at* one another. The aim is for the participants *not* to censor their imagination or suppress an impulse; for the sake of appearances or for fear of being held responsible for the contents of their responses.

In keeping with this, is the concept of obscene thought. By referring to the obscene, Johnstone is referring not to sex (although it may fall under it), but rather to that which is unseen or hidden. He calls on participants to be aware of *all* ideas that happen to come into their heads. Once that which is hidden has been brought out, the group can collectively decide whether that which has now been unearthed is applicable, deliberating objectively and without any feelings about judgement.

Finally one of the most significant points that Johnstone makes, in my opinion, is the premise of assessing what are original and unoriginal ideas. It is by far one of the most creatively crippling feelings that can seep into group work. As soon as the participants begin to censor responses, thinking that one or another response is not original, the participants immediately stop imagining. The problem comes in because individuals believe that originality is paramount. This is not necessarily the case, because popular theatre consists of issues that need addressing, and if the same issues persist then how can one move on to something else? The obvious can be original too, because every single individual is different and will bring something fresh to it; one can often come up with an original slant on something that already exists. Thought is the ultimate enemy of creativity, because as soon as someone consciously tries to come up with something fresh they are engaging thought processes, and therefore discernment or even a certain amount of censorship, with the result being that the process will be slowed and could even grind to a dead halt.



As a result of these concepts I tried my utmost to cultivate an atmosphere in which all ideas were voiced and seriously considered – no contribution was glibly tossed aside and all participants were encouraged to speak every- and all things that came into their minds.

One of the exercise that was used most effectively in broadened the participant's horizons, in the areas of associative thinking and creative brainstorming, was one I took from Elkind (1975: 18). In this particular exercise the group were asked to form a "think tank" – like those found in advertising agencies, and were then given the name of a product (something relatively obscure, like "toptads", "The Fermit" or "formulae 7"). The group was required to develop the marketing scheme for this particular item, taking into account target market, packaging and even safety hazards in their discussion of a product. None of the participants were to have a fixed idea of what the product may be at the outset but were, instead, to collectively 'make it up' as they went along. This exercise required the cast to listen carefully to one another, so that they could continue along the same vein as those who had voiced ideas before them, because no one had seen the product before in their lives. The exercise was fun, because there were no limitations and the group was collectively culpable for the outcome – no individual was required to solely carry the creative input and each new idea stemmed from the input of others.

#### *Character Creation:*

One of the earlier exercises that I did with the group (which was mentioned by most of them as one of their favourites) was an exercise aimed at more relaxed two-person interaction<sup>56</sup>. The group was given homework to come up with two scenarios for me: one between a man and a woman and one between two characters of the same sex (the men wrote a scenario for two males interacting, and the women, two women). I think that they all enjoyed this exercise because it was spontaneous character creation made easier (or harder?) by the fact that you had to play your character "off" of another. This meant that the character needed to be clearly formulated and the participants really needed to

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<sup>56</sup> See Question Three of Appendix A.

concentrate at all times so that the improvisation would proceed in a *feasible* manner. This exercise not only functioned to loosen them up to *playing* with one another but also opened up their minds to ideas of complete character creation and maintaining that particular character.

Another exercise, which not only helped with creative limbering but with character creation and later the text writing process, was one which required the participants to create a *composite individual* as homework, and present it to the group.

In previous exercises I had asked the group to create a mental picture of their character and then to visualise them moving around in an environment. The next step, therefore, was for the participants to create a complete and comprehensive character sketch in their minds and then to assume that character with a view to interaction with the group.

The elements that I gave them to keep in mind while creating their character were the following:

- *Physical Presence*: how does the character stand and move? What kind of deportment do they have?
- *Clothing and Accessories*: as an indication or extension of personality. And as a reference to how they interact with their environment.
- *Age*: not only their physical age, but also do they behave in a manner appropriate to their years?
- *Temperament*: my suggestion was to start with an extreme and then refine this area. Get a basis and add nuances.
- *Experience*: those life endeavours that have moulded and changed them – in other words they are to invent a background for their particular individual.
- *General attitude and outlook*: this was given as the final requirement because it functions as a culmination all that which has been furnished before. So for this, there was a moderate amount of generalisation, was the character a hard case? Did they mistrust others or trust too easily? Did they wish to be accepted or wish



to be different? Where they someone who tricked others into taking them into their confidence? Or merely a perpetual buffoon?

This character was then placed in a stressful situation, one where they were required to reveal all that makes up who they are. The improvisation was what some call a *hot seat*. The participant was to come in, in character, and was met with a “board” made up of the rest of the cast members. The remaining cast members, therefore, became a group that could be interviewing the individual for a job, or those sitting in on a disciplinary hearing, or even commending the individual on a job well done. In any of these circumstances, it became immediately clear, not only to those interviewing but also to the interviewee, which participants had developed a complete and comprehensive character and which participants had not. Those characters which were developed sufficiently had light and shade, those who had not completely “sold” themselves on the character soon discovered that it was impossible to maintain focus if the character’s nuances had not been coloured-in wholly.

#### *Physicality Magnification Exercises:*

There are *many* other exercises which have not been specifically mentioned, but which can be found in Appendix B. Some of these exercises that helped the participants to find the nuances of physical characterisation, while others dealt with variations in pace and rhythm of movement. Dealing with the areas of pace and rhythm opened new doors for the participants, as they discovered how speed of movement can completely change the impression and expression of a character.

In some of the situations I asked the participants to *over* improvise. By this I am not asking them to *over act* but to continue to improvise past a comfortable state where they are able to come up with dialogue. Ultimately they reach a state where they run out of “business” and I found that it was under these circumstances that they, in fact, found the essence of the character they were trying to find – without the, sometimes superfluous,

witty dialogue – just the pure and (relatively) unadulterated core of the individual they were seeking to bring to life.

### The Text Writing Process:

This process obviously began as a natural continuation of, and in conjunction with, the exercises already embarked upon. When it came to discovering the *raw material* for the text, I chose to go about research in true South African workshop style.

Because the submission outline had stated my intention to write a story about the life of an individual, it was important for the participants (and myself) to refresh our memories of the more juvenile stages of our existence. So as a form of research I organised for the group to go and observe the behaviour of young people in various educational institutions.

The research involved attending classes at schools in our immediate area. We attended classes and made general notes on the idiosyncrasies of individuals' behaviour and the general trends of each age group. I asked the participants to observe how individuals express themselves: the length of their sentences, their vocabulary, the use of tone and pitch and their inflection patterns; and all of this was to be related back to their personalities – with their speech patterns obviously being an expression of self. At the evening's rehearsal, we then had a relatively casual discussion about what we saw and experienced during the visit.

After this consolidation of ideas, we took our observations and turned them into characters. The actors were asked to create a character, very generally, then to allow that character to develop in an interaction with a peer. Essentially we were improvising the basic raw material that would be used in the text itself. I videotaped all of the improvisations so that I could also later, when it came to putting the text down onto paper, remember and clearly record those improvised ideas that had been the most feasible in each time frame and could record the *natural speech* of their inner characters.



### Improvisation Post-Script development:

After all the exercises and discussions that were done and videotaped, I took a few days off to write the text. It was a relatively laborious process because I attempted to accommodate all the ideas and findings that I believed to have been successful during the process of improvisation. I also asked the participants for their suggestions regarding the text and those elements or sketches which they believed would have been appropriate or accurate enough for inclusion.

Then I returned with the script. Once the participants had familiarised themselves with the text and recognised, to their delight in some cases, the inclusion of elements that they had discovered themselves, I decided to take the now-established characters one small step further.

Once the characters were relatively clearly defined in the minds of the participants, I asked them to improvise without the scripts once more. This was with a view to finding each respective character's motivation within the scene. The participants ultimately found their own words to describe the characters feelings at each particular juncture, which later functioned to "inform" the text.

The final performances were then done with the text that I had put together on my own, but with a few minute adjustments to phrasing in places. The rephrasing was only done when the participant's felt that they could not comfortably convey the intended meaning, or if they were unsure of the meaning themselves. On the whole, the group and I were pleased with the text that I had put together and they all felt that I had been fair in my inclusion of as much of their contributions as possible.

### Conclusions:

The *A Tale of Two Titties* experience was an extremely informative one. It led me to draw many conclusions about the areas of improvisation and its approaches, that I could feasibly and confidently use in future theatrical endeavours.

Firstly, I do not feel that, at a level where the participants are still learning how to use their own talents, one should employ improvisation for the creation of the text. I believe that this kind of creative endeavour can only be *successful* if, (and note that I do not say *possible* – for it is achievable) the group is lead by an exceptionally competent scriptwriter, as is the case with the Barney Simon and Athol Fugard, not one who is trying to please all the people, all the time (as I did). In the case of *A Tale of Two Titties*, although the process gave the group a wonderful feeling of ‘ownership’ of the piece itself, my attempts at including so many different ideas that did not necessarily correspond or “gel” with one another, ended up being more to the detriment of the piece than to its furtherment. The results in this case were not consistent with the kind of insights that the group had achieved. The end result did not, therefore, convey all the work and *self* invested in the piece, to the audience.

Another important factor is that, although it is good for participants to be able to remove themselves from the improvisational situation and make contact with some semblance of reality during the process, at a university level it is well-nigh impossible to maintain everyone’s energies at the right level of creativity at all times – because there are too many other distractions from academics to extra-mural responsibilities all of which demand their attention. At times, social lives and stress levels worked against the creative growth process.

It is also important to choose a group, more because of their compatibility, than because of their talents. This was my mistake – because of my love of music, and my desire to incorporate music into this particular piece, I cast those that could sing rather than those who would work best as a unit. The music itself was more of a success than the



production as a whole and was a triumph for all those involved. I chose relatively intricate choral pieces for the group and they rose to the occasion and acquitted themselves exceptionally well. The participants had many reservations when I first introduced them to the pieces, but the end result was so exceptional and polished musically that the critics giving feedback at the Grahamstown festival made specific comment on the delightful music.

One of my most crucial errors, however, may have been that I explained the goals of the exercises I had chosen, before we began to work on them. Prior explanation of the exercises placed the group under the undue pressure of what Viola Spolin terms “vocal predeterminations” (Spolin, 1963: 31). Thinking I was being democratic, I explained to the participants (quite clearly) the kind of play I was looking to create and the kind of results I was looking to achieve. Even by telling them a brief outline of the plot may have been detrimental to the creative process. I am sure that had I encountered the writings of Charles Marowitz, Augusto Boal<sup>57</sup> or any of the other theorists discussed in this thesis, or at least some sense of the notion of a “point of concentration” or a “clear dramatic focus”, prior to the improvisation process, I am certain that I would not have placed that kind of non-productive pressure on the participants. Although it may not have made the marked difference that I now accredit to it, I feel that the fact that the participants had this mindset in their subconscious may have had some kind of limiting effect.

Besides the creative process itself, there are also a few flaws in what I perceived to be the *research process*. Because we were only able to interact with the children in a scholastic situation, even if we made contact with them on a more casual level during breaks and before school, they were still interacting with us as adults, to the extent that they “acted up” for the investigation. It did, however, re-ignite – in all those participating, a very real sense of what *they* used to feel like when they were in a similar situation. I also noted, however, that the closer the age group got to our own, the harder it was for empathy to be

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<sup>57</sup> Boal was part of my original literature study, and although he has not been individually discussed in this thesis I am quite familiar of his theories and practical methods (see bibliography).

achieved. There was almost a level of competitive animosity between those who had just finished with their scholastic career (the participants) and those who were currently involved in theirs.

It is also possible to over-rehearse an improvisation text, in my impression, if one is investigating much of the same kind of situations and relationships with the same group of individuals and then provide them with a text inspired with concepts and incidents along much the same lines – the chances are that the *freshness* that makes improvisations so accessible to its audience can be lost – making the production plastic and artificial.

The experience as a whole was an extremely positive one though. I learnt much about the control of group dynamics and I believe that the cast came to appreciate my decisions and script writing as true to our vision and with their collective best interests in mind. The cast admits to having felt very comfortable with the structure of the process and I believe that the final product achieved the goals for which we had originally intended it. The text was light-hearted and exceptionally accessible to the audience; many audience members who spoke to me after the performances were thrilled at how true to their own experiences the sketches were, and were delighted at being reminded of how wonderful it was to be a certain age. The audience laughed and cried with us, and the cast was able to have fun on stage with a piece that they not only felt ownership of but that they also felt reflected the hard work that went into creating the unique final presentation.

#### General summery of cast feedback:

As I have mentioned before, if this study could have been undertaken *before* embarking on the project, the practical process could have been that much more effective. Despite my own concerns voiced above, the process appears to have been a success, in the eyes of the participants who all believe that they learned a lot and were happy with the process and its clarity of progression. The exercises seemed to perform the required ice-breaker and “loosening up” function I had desired, and also helped in the creation of characters and the investigation of scenarios for the script. The inclusion of the music was



admittedly a personal touch, but one which I believe was immensely successful – a feeling with which the cast (mostly) concur. The element of script writing is one of the only areas where there is a little contention; the group is split between those who would have liked to have been party to the writing process and those who would not. I believe that, in this particular instance, the former would not have been logistically possible because of time constraints. Also I was concerned not to make the process tedious, therefore I tackled this particular task on my own. Despite this, almost all of the members of the cast agree that they had a sense of ownership and pride in the piece (which was my ultimate goal), a feeling most successfully precipitated in the workshop theatre process.

## **Appendix A: Transcribed interview:**

### **Cast list:**

Suzanne Keyter

Bernice Clarke

Jana Nortier

Anneke Senekal

Hykie Berg

Marthinus Janse van Vuuren

Louis Looock

(I was unfortunately not able to schedule a time with Anneke Senekal for an interview)

#### 1. How did you feel about the structure of the creative process?

*Suzanne Keyter:* I agree with the structure of the creative process because this play was obviously more of an internal journey and look at things not just a normal play of just characterisation – so I agree with the creative process, where we were going to schools doing research ourselves, we as actors, the whole thing meant quite a lot more for us, and actually helped in the characterisation.

*Bernice Clarke:* I thought it was brilliant because everything that we did, the improvs and the exercises and the games and things – first of all the games that we played made us all comfortable with each other and gave us a chance to loosen up or whatever. And all the improvs, even though at the beginning we weren't sure, but as the process carried on you realised that everything was motivated and all of it was working towards the final product. So I think it was great and really fun as well.

*Jana Nortier:* I really enjoyed it, I think it worked and I think that it was exactly what we needed to go through to get the exact product we wanted. And we also used so much of the improvs in the actual play and that makes it easier to work with each other in the play.

*Hykie Berg:* I felt that going to the schools and getting into contact with the kids helped me a lot, I feel that it would have helped me a lot if we had got to know them on a more



personal level, not just in the classroom or whatever, but the pre-primary helped me a lot and relating to things I did as a kid, but personally I could have done a little more research so that didn't do the most obvious things that a kid would have done. I felt it was all applicable to what we wanted to do, I feel we did enough research and the whole thing came into place when we actually got the script, I think that the rehearsal period with the actual script was a bit long – we could have intensified the rehearsal period, making it a bit shorter.

*Marthinus Janse van Vuuren*: I liked it very much I have been in a couple of workshop productions before, but in a way the structure of *A Tale of Two Titties* was a lot stronger. There was a goal in everything and it was explained to us every time before we did something what we are doing this for. I appreciated it; the efficiency of the process was obvious in the text. You could see all the aspects that were covered during the workshop phase with the improvs and everything integrated into the text and I really appreciated that.

*Louis Loock*<sup>58</sup>: The structure, at the beginning, felt a little bit long for me. Towards the end because you didn't tell us where we were going and we never got a working text, well you did give us an idea, but in the beginning it was just improvise, improvise, improvise, so at the beginning the structure felt a little bit long for me and a bit unnecessary, towards the end when we saw the direction you were pushing in we began to realise where the text was going to.

## 2. Did the exercises make you sufficiently comfortable around each other before we began with the improvisations?

*Suzanne*: Oh sure, I think you could have seen the difference. We, as a cast immediately after we had the sessions and once we'd been to the school and came back, we were closer. And because we were a cast with only two second years and the rest were third years it made it kind of awkward and we were kind of weird, but eventually we found each other, then it was so much nicer. Like that one night with the three Allegra's at the camp, we went and had wine afterwards at Anneke's flat, and our acting improved from

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<sup>58</sup> Note that I have translated Louis Loock's interview from the original Afrikaans.

then on. So definitely the exercises and improvisations made us get to know each other better and our acting styles. We were working around each other: “that works this way”, so ja, it definitely improved our acting.

*Bernice:* I think that especially for me – because pretty much everyone else was in their third year, it really was an icebreaker – because ok you have to make this machine and you have to touch each other, and you have to interact with each other – so it was an excellent icebreaker for me personally.

*Jana:* The games we played helped us to bond, because especially in this play, we had to work closely with each other and had to get to know each other very well first.

*Hykie:* Yes, definitely, it forced us to become personal with each other and drop the bullshit and realize that we are all actors and even if we do embarrass ourselves – let’s just do it and of course, it always helps if you are more comfortable with each other.

*Marthinus:* Yes, if you had to behave like a three year old amongst a bunch of actors that you are not familiar with, I think that is the ultimate icebreaker. You are learning to let go of all you inhibitions, and in a way everyone is making fools of themselves and you don’t feel as if you are as ridiculous as the others, you don’t feel as though you are unique.

*Louis:* Yes definitely. The exercises that we did had a nice balance between the absurdity of them and the logic behind them, because a lot of the exercises at the beginning because they were children’s exercises we felt a bit stupid, but we knew that everybody had to do it so that put the cast in the same mindset, the fact that the stuff we were doing, everybody had to do. So it really helped but with the improvisations I know the third years very well but it definitely helped with the second years even though when I think back on it now a lot of the time the third years improvised together and the second years improvised together, so maybe there I would have liked it if more we have had the opportunity to work with each other and then maybe we could have got more material out of it.



3. What was your favourite exercise, if you can remember?

*Suzanne:* I really liked the improvs where we went home and wrote down on a piece of paper situations and then swapped them around (the interactions between male and females?) Ja, I loved that because (it gave a basis from which to brainstorm?) yes and to link up with the last question – because we were working with Hykie and then Louis and then Marthinus, we really got to know each other and helped the process and the situations were so nicely detailed so you had to kind of know the basis of what's going on.

*Bernice:* I thoroughly enjoyed, as far as the games went – the wounded tag. But my favourite actual exercise was the day when we wrote out those scenarios and they all got switched and then we had to act out the scenarios. And the fact that we had everything of video camera was helpful.

*Jana:* Those improvs that we wrote on the piece of paper and then we had to go two at a time so that we worked within a scenario. Those were fun to do and watch.

*Hykie:* The story telling, kind of building on something as you go along, - not STOP – stop – I don't ever want to play that game again, in my life! But also the one where we froze and had to say what we were doing, helped psychologically.

*Marthinus:* My favourite exercise was one of the hot seat things where we had to design a character and there was a panel. People really took it overboard and I didn't even get time to portray my character I was just yelled at all the time and criticised, and you had to react all the time in character, I think that was very interesting.

*Louis:* It was definitely the one where we sat in the circle and started with a story and then you said when the next person had to carry on with the story, because that improves an actor's ability to improvise quickly and to think off the top of his head.

4. Did the 'research visits' help with your character creation in the improvisations?

*Suzanne:* Definitely, the research helped and I personally really enjoyed going to the schools and doing research for this role or character. Of course you've got this one specific idea in your head then with and via the schools it just broadens your

perspectives. Because when you go on stage its not just your stereotypical, “this is what children do as this age”, when we were on stage we were like a class of five year olds.

*Bernice:* I think the research visits were incredibly important for the improvs and then the improvs were important for our final characterisation. I didn’t always think back to the visits when we actually had the final text, when I played little Allegra, ok sometimes I thought back to those kids, but I think that to got us into that mode, I think that the research visits were very important because first we used the visits to do the improvs, but then when we came to working with the actual text I thought back to the improvs most of the time not so much back to the actual research but I think to get the ball rolling it was very essential.

*Jana:* Especially the pre-primary visits, not so much the high schools and the primary schools cause the children are not so keen to interact with you, so that makes it a little more difficult.

*Hykie:* I’m very interested in the Stanislavski method, and he believes that you have to go out and do research because for your characters is like layers that you’ve got and you have to find words which are in your conscious memory and they become subconscious when you go out and find someone who is like the actual character like that and simulate the a kind of gesture and physicality and thought patterns and then build on these layers one on top of the other – so make a resource so that you can build the character and I picked up a lot of things at school and I remember a lot of things but without doing the research it would have been such a stereotypical...you know, it would have been all the obvious things.

*Marthinus:* Some of it did, some of it didn’t. For example I don’t think the high school visit was that effective it was as if the pupils especially at high school level were putting an act on for us they were very inhibited and trying to draw our attention all the time. In a way you got something out of it but also due to the fact that we are relatively fresh out of high school I don’t think that the high school visits were all that necessary. (So do you think, in a different environment it would have been better?) Yes definitely a social environment or even if we knew a group of high school students and could have gotten to know the mannerisms much better.



*Louis:* I feel, if I think back now, when we first went to the schools, I thought wow this is going to be great, but I feel that for the length of the play and the type of scenarios that the characters eventually found themselves in maybe it wasn't so necessary to go as often as we did. Because the characters were so often in comical situations it was easier for me as an actor to play that which was comic behind the situation. If it was a serious situation, if it was something serious which had happened to a child if it was in a serious situation or scenario then I would have said it was necessary to do even more research. But because its comical I feel that the research could have been a little bit too much research but it did help.

5. How did you feel about the final product? Did you feel like you had some kind of 'ownership' of it?

*Suzanne:* Of course we did we were part of it all the way through. In one of the later questions, about the writing, you gave us homework where we had to write a poem of a specific age group and it made us part of the process. I don't have a problem with the fact that you eventually you were the one sitting and writing it, I don't think seven people could sit around in a circle going "ok, I think the character should say this now". It would have the process so much longer (tedious almost). Ja, you included us the whole time – giving us homework, and making us do the research. I really don't have a problem with you just writing alone and it was actually better 'cause it was your vision and we just helped (creatively). Ja and with the final product from our first chat and then eventually what we had on stage, I was very proud that we kept to our idea and what we wanted to do with it. (So you had a pretty clear idea of where it was going all the time?) Oh definitely.

*Bernice:* What was really cool that there was little things that we spoke about – yes we did this when we were kids, and there was little parts there that every single person had said. I think in the end, right up until the end I was never absolutely sure where the story was going or who this Allegra person was but at the end you could see – ok that was taken from that improv that they did and at the end you could see, ok there is my little bit that I contributed.

*Jana:* I was very happy it was like having part of me in the production, not just having a role from the outside and trying to make it work and fit as part of you, it was like part of you in the play.

*Hykie:* I felt sort of proud in doing it but there were a couple, a couple of scenes that could have been much more defined and there could have been more motivation behind certain things that we did. Like the drunk scene, it could have been more defined – more energy and direction, maybe, it was note that was given to us a couple of times but that needed to be worked on, (more rehearsal maybe?) not really more defined and worked out rather that improvised, people were wondering what the motivation was, I mean we all understood the camaraderie but a lot of people in the audience weren't all that sure what was going on.

*Marthinus:* Yes, I think I wouldn't say that I felt that I had ownership over the whole text. But there were certain aspects like the school camp where Mark rolls joints with the tea that was based on my personal experience and I think small bits and pieces were like "shit" this happened to me and she remembered it and wrote it down. Not everything, everyone had to have a certain fragment of the text based on their personal experiences but I think that in a whole as a group we had ownership of it.

*Louis:* Yes, the final product, with regard to the text I would really liked to have had that the cast were able to give more input with regard to the dialogue and not just the scenarios but the dialogue and what physically happens in the text.

6. Would you have preferred to have been part of the actual writing of the script or was being part of the 'brainstorming' enough?

*Suzanne:* [answered in the previous question]

*Bernice:* I was totally happy not to have written anything, brainstorming and giving my ideas and opinions and everything then giving it to someone else and having them write the text is a lot better than everyone sitting down and put it into words because everyone can give there creative ideas but at some point someone has to say ok keep this, that goes.



*Jana:* No I am happy to be part of the brainstorming and doing the improves so that we could stimulate ideas for you as the writer. I wouldn't like being part of the script writing because there has to be a main person that takes the ideas and put it together and writing.

*Hykie:* I think because there were certain boundaries set out for us at the beginning that we were going to be part of the research process, and you will be writing the script, I think if I would have know from the beginning I might have liked to but I also understood that sometimes a play is an extension of someone, I understand that this play had a lot to do with your childhood too, and I would felt that if that was the motivation behind it, I would have felt weird coming in on that.

*Marthinus:* It would have been a good idea I think if we had more time – we should have given it a go, but obviously we were pressed for time and we had to start rehearsing and that the best option was that Ranza had to write the text. But I think that we would have had even more ownership over the text if we were actually allowed to give more directly into the text.

*Louis:* Not the whole script but it would have been great and it would have been nice if the actors were able to go through the entire creative process together and then everybody together compiled the text.

#### 7. The inclusion of music, did you think it necessary?

*Suzanne:* Yes definitely necessary. It kind of helped with the whole idea of it all being in Allegra's head. The music kind of comes with that whole feeling and it kind of romanticises it all. And I really felt the music was nice. I struggled a little with *Bawo* but we got there, sometimes it felt, when we were five year olds we were singing like opera singers but you had to keep in mind that this was all in Allegra's head and these were her memories, how she saw it.

*Bernice:* I think it was nice, I enjoyed the singing but I don't think it was essential to the actual production, but it gave it a really nice touch and because we went through the whole process I could see it was a nice link but we could have done the thing without it – I don't think it would have been as cool but we could have done it.

*Jana:* The music was important, it gave another dimension to the play, it's always good to have different elements to a play.

*Hykie:* No, Peter Voges, you know – he told me that we, as a student production made an impression on him because he was so excited and happy about what we had done with the music and all, and no, without the music it would just have been another student production. The thing is because I am Afrikaans I can't really relate to the kind of songs used but I got into it and a tried to pick up the English humour in it.

*Marthinus:* The music, the music, the music. Yes in a way it was necessary, I think the audiences enjoyed it – it went down very well, I didn't always agree with your choice of music. For example the *Bawo* song and things like that. You know I would have chosen something else but obviously it would have been a bit more clichéd and a matter of personal opinion and taste, but everything worked effectively during the run of the show. Especially in Grahamstown where the critics actually loved the music.

*Louis:* Yes, because the music, although a lot of the situations were relatively realistic it was nice that there was music included because it gave the piece a kind of absurd feel. Not so absurd that the audience feel “what's going on here?” but it gives theatre a nice, different touch because the use of music. One song that I did not feel was motivated though was the Zulu song that we included.

#### 8. Was there anything else you would have included?

*Suzanne:* Included, no, I don't think so.

*Bernice:* No I can't think of anything.

*Jana:* No. I liked that it had a specific time and place that could be applied to any other time and space anywhere. Universal.

*Hykie:* Anything included: the computer scene we could have made it bigger, because it showed the creative process, if we had to include more things, make it more sounds, beer cans, paint tins, various things...

*Marthinus:* No. Now that is a difficult question. Of course there is a couple of things I would have included but I have already forgotten about it so I obviously didn't feel that strongly about it. Everyone has a certain dream or idea that they want to see in



everything but at the end of the day you have to submit to the director and the text writer and accept it as it is.

*Louis:* Not in the text but in the production as a whole, and it is a personal thing, because the music gives the production an absurd feel I would have put in some more actual movement. Because it was acting the whole time and then it was music but if we could have put movement into the piece it would have given it yet another touch that would have been nice.

9. In the bigger picture, when you move outside of the drama department would this process of creation be viable and effective?

*Suzanne:* Outside: maybe in a company of a bunch of ten actors, this kind of process could be helpful where five go off and research would help, but I don't really think that in the drama department, it was nice – in a structure where we are still learning. The research is useful in a lot of structures, especially with students, because I don't think they know how to do that. And obviously in the industry you will need to do research. Improvs, I think that this structure would definitely work in a company – a smaller group of actors.

*Bernice:* Oh totally, definitely, definitely, that was one of the things that made the process very worthwhile for me, I enjoyed working up to the point where we had the text – to a certain extent I enjoyed that more than working on the actual text, I mean I love the play, but the actual process, it had a lot to do with the fact that your exercises were all really well planned and very well motivated, what we did yesterday was not what we did today but you can see it is all part of the greater plan of things.

*Jana:* I think yes, if you have a company and when you are looking to put together a play then it would work, but I don't think if you are bringing different people together it would work because it is such a long process, took us 7 weeks – I don't think it will work for anyone but companies, not for someone alone in the industry really, so if people know each other (and you can by-pass the icebreaker stage) yes, and get to the real stuff quicker.

*Hykie:* In the theatre industry? If you want to create work yourself – that is the way to do it! That is what I have learnt from previous workshops as well, you go out you do your research and then find what you need and there is a big difference between being an idealist and a realist and it all good and well to have all these ideas and talking about it and rather go out – do your research and be an activist get everything together on paper and rehearse it - take it to the people at the festival do it. Be proactive instead of reactive.

*Mathinus:* Definitely, definitely. Especially in amateur theatre. When we started out with our acting classes in this department we did improv exercises and that was the phase of my education in this department which I enjoyed the most. I loved improvisation and I think on an amateur basis it would work perfectly. On a professional basis, ok ja, but I think the more professional and the more experienced you become, the more difficult it becomes to improvise. So in certain genres it is a very good idea, African theatre ja brilliant, I think if you go into a township and you tell them we are going to write a play about your personal experiences and your personal issues, and these are the improv exercises I think it's a brilliant idea and a wonderful concept and I think it should be used more because I think that's the only way that new work is going to be generated in the arts in South Africa.

*Louis:* It is very difficult to answer because at the moment people have a very fixed idea as to how theatre should be made, I feel that at the moment that there is such a strong network of actors and directors and people that make theatre in South Africa and this is held as the norm and I feel that although the piece as a whole has potential to do something in South African theatre it will be difficult, because people come to the theatre with a preconceived idea of what theatre should be, but I think that it definitely has potential if people can develop it further and if somebody can do this kind of thing for a second time it would be nice.



## **Appendix B: Some Examples of Exercises used during *A Tale of Two Titties*:**

### **Opener exercises:**

#### *Physical “warm ups”:*

**K-I-N-G/S-T-O-P:** This is obviously based on the children’s game used to hone control of motor skills in relation to audio stimulus. In other words, the participants are spurred to action and halted by the verbal command of an individual. They were required to move whenever the person who is “on” has their back turned and is repeating K-I-N-G or S-T-O-P, and when the person finishes the sentence and turns around to see the rest of the group they are required to “freeze”; anyone who is still moving or loses balance is “out”.

**Wounded TAG:** This exercise, based on the original TAG, involves the person who is “on” passing the responsibility of catching the others to someone else by TAGGING them. In this version, however, the person who is “on” touches the person they TAG in different areas of their body. The person who has then been TAGGED is “wounded” on the point of contact and is required to chase the others – baring that particular “wound”. If they are touched on their leg – they must drag it, if they are touched on their arm - it becomes limp or lame etc.

**Atmospheres:** This also involves a certain amount of imagining. The group is required to move around in the space, while the facilitator is describing that particular space. For instance if they are moving through a “forest”, they are told if it is dense or swamp-like, then they are to visualise and move accordingly – involving as much of their bodies as possible – climbing over roots and under branches etc. They are to imagine the animals they encounter and the noises they hear. The setting can then be changed to the desert or the moon, both of which evoke completely different physical responses and reactions in the body and physicality.

**Things in space:** This is played in pairs where the two participants pass an imaginary object between them. Each participant must concentrate on the shape, weight and size of their object clearly defining it each time they have it in their hands. Then when the object is “passed on” the partner is to receive the object; acknowledging it’s shape, size and weight. Then the participant who has just received the object is required to change that object into something else, clearly defining it for their partner before passing it back.

**Fast and Slow Motion:** This exercise is done with a view to helping the group to develop some sense of group timing. They are given a scenario, like a bank robbery or the pirate invasion of a cargo ship, and told to do it firstly in normal time and then faster or slower. This helps individuals focus on smaller details and develop an awareness of the pace of the movements of those around them.

**“What are you doing?”:** This particular exercise can be used for a creative limbering exercise too. The group move around the room as energetically as possible for a few minutes and then when they are told to freeze and find themselves in a strange position they have to think on their feet – and tell the facilitator what they are doing – as can be seen from their frozen position.

#### *Trust Exercises:*

**Navigation:** A person is blindfolded and required to walk through a maze of obstacles that are placed around the room. The blindfolded participants only navigational tools are the verbal directions of another participant – who needs to be careful and precise in their delivery of those directions.

**Taking the Weight:** A participant lies down and relaxes their body. The rest of the group then picks the participant up and carries their weight around the room. This journey could also be over simple obstacles and through a few levels.



### Creative Limbering exercises:

#### *Imagining an image:*

**Picture This:** The participants are asked to close their eyes and just to “picture” what is said to them: The scenario is as follows: A man walks down some stairs opens a door and steps out into the street, looking left and right. The group is then asked to describe what they saw. The exercise requires the group to start paying attention to detail – what was the man wearing? What do the stairs look like? What does the door look like? What does the street look like? Where is it? Are there people or anyone you know personally? This showed the group the power of imagining and the variety of interpretations that can be generated even when the group is considering exactly the same set of circumstances.

**The People-Machine:** One of the participants starts the exercise assuming a position in the space and moving and making a sound of some kind. The others join one by one and in no particular order, helping to form a “working” unit, which must then function as a whole for a time and then grind to a halt in unison. This means that they all need to be sensitive to the timing of those around them and try to keep with it.

#### *Group Focus Exercises:*

**Letter Hot Potato:** A version of the “passing game”, where an object is to be passed as quickly as possible around a group of participants without dropping it. This is slightly more intense, however, because now the participants are also required to come up with four words starting with a letter given to them by the facilitator. They have to find four words starting with the allocated letter as quickly as possible before the potato can be passed on into the hands of the next person. The facilitator can change the letter when they believe the group has fully “milked” its potential.

**Rhyming Couplets:** A game for a slightly more advanced group. This requires the group to be involved in a continuous story that is passed around a circle. The twist is that every second sentence has to rhyme with the previous one. For the story to make sense in the end this requires much concentration, and therefore cannot be done when a group is even a little fatigued.

**Group Mirror:** In this exercise there is someone who initiates and someone who guesses. The person who guesses is sent out of the room while the initiator is nominated. The “guesser” is then allowed back into the room to join the group. The group then moves, in as close to unison as possible, following simple movements made by the initiator, while the “guesser” tries to discern who is leading.

**Tableau:** Firstly the group are given a scenario, like a school playground, a shopping centre, a disco or an intermission during a theatre performance. Then one of the participants begins by taking up the position of someone who would feasibly be in that particular situation and moves accordingly. The rest of the group join him one by one and then group (like the Machine) are to sense the timing of those around them and once the scene has reached a climax they are to try and bring it to a comfortable denouement and conclusion.

**The Fatal Story and the Fickle King:** As an adaptation of a “continuous story”, the entire group is involved in the continuation of a narrative. In this case the person who is “on” sits in the position of “Fickle King” while the rest of the group are “court jesters” trying to entertain the king. The king is at liberty to swop between jesters at any time and when he believes that the jester has made a bad or unoriginal contribution at some stage he is at liberty to “kill” that particular jester – who then “dies” as dramatically as possible. The last jester standing is the king in the next round.

**The Advertising Agency:** As described in Chapter Four.



*Verbal Dynamics and Creativity:*

**You have “it”, I want “it”:** In this game the person who “has” the object decides on what IT is but does not tell the person who “wants it”. The person who wants it is then required to try and persuade the person who has IT to give IT to them. In the process of persuasion the one who “wants it” is able to “probe” for clues as to what the object is. If and when they are able to guess what the object is they can “have IT”. The point of the game is for the one who “has it” to give only subtle clues and the one who “wants it” to use probing statements (as opposed to questions).

**Simultaneous Conversation:** This is a test of the participants ability to “multi-task<sup>59</sup>”. The participants sit in pairs and are required to carry out a conversation, talking at the same time (or simultaneously). They do not take turns in talking; they talk over, around and through one another, sticking to their own train of the thought, while trying and listen to the other person’s words at the same time. When the exercise is finished the participants are required to try and report what they heard from the other person’s conversation.

**“Who am I?”:** The ultimate hot seat. A member of the group goes out of the room and the rest of them decide who that person IS. They then decide who they, as a group, are in relation to that particular person and also decide on the reason why that person is coming to interact with them as a group (or as individuals). The person then comes back into the room and the others try to let the person know who he is and why he is there through an interaction that would feasibly occur between the individual’s identity and the group’s identity, under the pre-decided particular circumstances. For example: the individual is a thirty-year-old ex-convict trying to get a job and coming before an interview board. Ultimately, the one in the hot seat has to guess who they are, why they are there and who the group is.

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<sup>59</sup> A term I use loosely here to refer to doing many things at one – derived from computer terminology.

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